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The Bronze Emperor

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An aerial, black and white photograph of St. Peter's Square in Rome. The square is a large, elliptical plaza with a complex geometric pattern of light-colored paving stones. It is flanked by two long, two-story colonnades with classical columns. In the center of the square is a large, ornate fountain. The background shows the dense urban fabric of Rome, with numerous buildings and a large dome visible in the distance.

ELAYNE AUDREY BECKER

THE BRONZE EMPEROR

One

Sirmium, 175

He woke and wondered how many more would die that day.

The first shades of light crept into the tent, releasing the man from another restless night. He brought his calloused hands to his face and breathed deeply. It was pointless to linger but still he did, savoring the remaining scraps of quiet as the camp began to stir. This early in the day, if he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was back in Rome. Rome, where his only remaining son lived. Rome, which was his to command. Rome, which he had not seen in seven years.

But war offered no respite. Soon the illusion of peace would be broken by the clattering of metal and the stomping of fires and the muttering of the damned. No longer able to delay in good conscience, he rose and reached into the basin to his left, splashing his face with tepid water. A slave immediately materialized to help strap on his armor, and within minutes he was ready. Without looking back he pushed open the tent, silently begged forgiveness of the gods for his selfishness, and stepped out into the dawn.

The response was immediate. “*Imperator*,” called three different equestrians at once. The Emperor motioned for them to follow as he weaved through the mass of tents. Already the camp was bustling.

“News?” he asked, now fully alert. He did not hesitate as the soldiers moving about immediately cleared a path for his party and fell into sleepy bows.

“Two of our men have just returned from the border,” the commander Fulvius replied swiftly. “They report dissension among the Sarmatae!”

The Emperor nodded, not as quick to hope. The invasion of the Marcomanni, a Germanic people from north of the Danube, in 167 had plunged Rome into a war that sometimes seemed it would never end. Two years later, the death of his co-Emperor Lucius Verus one snowy January morning had left Marcus in sole command. He set out from Rome that year and hadn’t seen it since. The Sarmatian Jazyges were now the target of the latest campaign. “Perhaps given time, they will come to realize the folly of their exploits and put an end to this foolishness,” he offered.

“It seems unlikely that they would seek peace so readily,” warned the commander Aemilius, eying the man that hurried over to join their group.

“Unlikely,” the Emperor agreed. “But perhaps they would accept it if it were offered.”

“You want to make a treaty?” Aemilius couldn’t quite keep the disapproval from his voice, and the Emperor noticed.

“I *want* to do what is best for my people. If there is a chance the Sarmatae would accept a treaty, I think we should consider it. The goal is to win, not to waste valuable Roman blood if we can spare it.”

“I am no warmonger,” Aemilius replied rather stiffly. “I simply fear the efficacy of papyrus and words in place of swords and javelins.”

“I know you’re not. That’s why I value your opinion. Your fear is not unreasonable, Aemilius. I am only putting a treaty on the table.”

“Very good then, *Comes*.”

“What else?”

The newcomer nudged his way to the front of the pack. “Lucius awaits your decision on the proposition we discussed two nights ago.”

“Ah yes, the food supply. I would like to consult Cornelius. Has he sent word?” Cornelius Fronto was a prominent member of the Senate. He was also a friend and most trusted advisor.

“Indeed. He should arrive within the week.”

“Good.” The Emperor nodded his dismissal, and the man scurried away.

The party reached the lines of horses, and Marcus found his gray gelding pawing the ground impatiently. Patting the horse’s broad neck, the Emperor took the reins and turned back to the commanders. He paused thoughtfully, looking each of them in the eye as if trying to guess their thoughts.

“I believe we should hit them hard today,” he said at last. “Take the offensive. Rush them. Strike fear into their hearts. If they are indeed beginning to divide, it will be harder for them to counter such an attack. Besides, they might be more receptive to the idea of peace after such a blow. What say you?”

All three commanders were nodding. “I think this a wise course,” said Aemilius.

Marcus waited until all three had voiced their approval before mounting his horse. “Who will arrange the formation and inform the troops that the plan for today’s attack has changed?”

“I will, *Comes*,” said Fulvius. “But I think you should speak to the men when they’ve gathered. Rally them for the task ahead.”

“Indeed I shall,” Marcus agreed.

“*Imperator!*”

The cry came from somewhere behind them. They turned and spotted an anxious-looking older man hastening towards the Emperor. “*Imperator*,” he repeated when he reached the small party, bowing low and remaining bent as he tried to catch his breath.

“Claudius,” said Marcus, trying to ignore the dread that pricked at his skin. His advisor Claudius rarely became visibly agitated. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Avidius Cassius, *Amice*. Word has just reached us. He’s been proclaimed emperor!”

“Impossible,” spat Horatius, the third commander in the group. Avidius Cassius had led the Romans to victory against the Parthians a decade prior, and Marcus had appointed him governor of Syria.

"It's true," Claudius assured them, still panting.

"Where has he been recognized?" Aemilius demanded.

"Syria, Egypt. Maybe elsewhere."

"We must put a stop to this at once!" Horatius thundered, looking murderous.

"I agree," said Claudius, addressing the Emperor directly. "It cannot be permitted to spread."

Marcus, who had remained silent thus far, returned his advisor's stare. "Do you know why Avidius would have done this?" he asked in a level voice.

"No. Perhaps he thought you were dead."

"Or could be gotten rid of!" Horatius added.

"Peace, Horatius," said the Emperor. "We'll take care of it. Today we'll continue with the attack as planned. Then we will draft a peace treaty that the Sarmatae must sign. I'm afraid there is no more time to think on it, Aemilius. In the meantime, Claudius, summon my son, to come as quickly as possible. When he arrives, I'll assemble a company, and we'll head East."



Rome, 176

What should have been a joyous occasion was marred by tragedy.

At least, it was for Marcus Aurelius. The thousands of people lining the streets of Rome seemed anything but distraught. Their emperor had returned to the city after a seven year absence, victorious. *Sarmaticus*, they now called him. He who had defeated the Sarmatians.

The strong offensive charge had had the desired effect; the Jazyges, preoccupied with debates over their strategy and the likelihood of success, had not expected such a direct assault and in their panic, hadn't known to whom turn to for leadership. The battle was quick and bloody.

The next day, Marcus's camp had offered a treaty requiring the defeated to contribute thousands of men to Roman armies in exchange for peace. The Sarmatians accepted.

Marcus was pleased with the treaty and certainly glad to be back in Rome. Running the Empire from outside the city had presented plenty of challenges, and he had sometimes felt distant from his charges. But in spite of the cheers erupting all around, the city seemed emptier to him, now that his wife was dead.

Annia Galeria Faustina. *Mater castrorum*. Faustina had been with Marcus even as he campaigned for years along the Danube, never tiring, never complaining. Her presence had been a comfort to him throughout the war. Then she and their thirteen-year-old son Commodus had joined the group that accompanied Marcus when he set out to meet Avidius Cassius, and she died

on the journey. The funeral had been a terrible affair, and Marcus had barely been able to pull himself from his grief and continue onward. They had been married for thirty years.

Cassius, it turned out, was slain before the party even reached him, upon the knife of one of his own soldiers.

The Emperor tried to push his misery from his thoughts and focus instead on the celebration happening all around him. A triumph, to honor his victory over the Marcomanni and the Sarmatians. He could no longer make out all of the magistrates leading the procession, though the music from ahead reached him with clarity. He glanced down at the prisoners of war, bound and forced to walk before him. Any sympathy he might have felt vanished the instant he recalled that these people had dared to threaten his Empire. He looked once and did not look again. He regretted that so much of his reign had been spent away in war, but now, for however brief a time, he was back in Rome. He spent the rest of the procession reveling in the presence of his people.

The Romans cried out in fury when the prisoners came into view, slinging taunts and insults and promises of death. No one was reluctant, no one held back. But their venomous calls turned to cries of delight when they saw their emperor.

When he passed, the masses thundered, stomping their feet and shouting with glee. The Emperor was back. He was resplendent atop his chariot, a vision of purple and gold. He was power and mercy. He was fame and glory. He was Rome.

Two

Rome, 180

Paulinus's agitation grew with each passing moment. The sun was sweltering, and business hours would soon be over. Neighbors were already starting to close their doors for the day, and he itched to do the same. Instead he paced around the vestibule, awaiting his guest. A well-dressed man with an air of self-importance had come earlier, informing him that a senator would be arriving later in the day to discuss a matter of business. That had been hours ago. Now all Paulinus wanted was to retreat inside and eat.

"I'm glad your doors are still open," said a voice from behind.

Paulinus spun around and smiled, relieved that his wait was finally over. "Of course, when one is expecting a visitor like yourself." He nodded respectfully. "Please, come in."

The man standing in the entrance was tall and distinguished-looking, his posture erect and his grey beard magnificent. He was dressed in black.

At Paulinus's request, he crossed the threshold and looked about. "The hour is late," he began, "And I imagine you want to escape the heat. I will get straight to the point." His gaze rested on Paulinus. "My name is Aufidius Victorinus. I was very well acquainted with the late Emperor."

Marcus Aurelius had fallen ill while away on a second campaign against the Germanic tribes. It had been three weeks since his death.

Paulinus bowed his head. "The world has lost a great man. The city feels different already." It was true. Ever since the news had reached them, people cried in the streets, business had slowed, and Rome itself seemed to sink with grief. Many steps had already been taken to honor the dead Emperor; Marcus was deified immediately following his death, and Paulinus had heard rumors of plans to build a temple. Marcus's son Commodus, who had joined him in the second campaign and had become sole emperor upon his father's death, had not yet returned to Rome.

"Indeed," said Aufidius. "He was undoubtedly one of the greatest emperors Rome has ever known. It follows, then, that he should be commemorated in a way befitting a life as great as his."

Understanding began to dawn on Paulinus. "Commemorated, sir?"

"You have been recommended as a fine sculptor." Paulinus began to protest half-heartedly, but the senator cut him off. "No need for false modesty. I have seen your work myself and it is exquisite."

"Thank you, Senator."

"I, and the rest of the Senate, would like you to craft a statue, in honor of the late Emperor."

“A statue!” exclaimed Paulinus. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure. But what of its design? Does the Senate have a particular one in mind?”

“The Emperor was a man of many gifts, but he died before he was able to put all of them to use,” Aufidius replied. “War consumed most of his reign, and therefore it is his skill in war which must be memorialized. Perhaps his double triumph over the Marcomanni and the Sarmatae. The most important thing is that it be a suitable testament to his character and his legacy. Are you up to the task?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind. I’ll begin immediately.”

“I am glad to hear it. The sooner you can have it done, the better.” Aufidius turned to leave.

“I am honored by this request, Senator. Thank you.”

Aufidius looked back and smiled, though the grief in his eyes was evident. “Just honor him, as he deserves to be honored.”

With that, Aufidius Victorinus departed. The sculptor watched him go, all thoughts of heat forgotten.



Paulinus threw his stylus aside with perhaps more force than necessary. This was the fifth sketch he had rejected. None of his ideas so far had been good enough.

This statue was the most important commission of his career to date. He could not afford to fail. Not that he ever accepted failure anyway. Anything he made had to be the best. Every line had to be precise, every fold had to look soft and supple. The smallest detail frequently became an hour’s obsession. Some called it brilliance. Others called it madness. He called it necessity.

The wooden stylus hit the ground hard, snapping into pieces. Paulinus groaned and put his hands to his face. Back to the beginning.

Think.

It would have to be big. No, more than that. Huge. Something to reflect the Emperor’s power. His *virtus*. Nay, his very existence.

He would make it from bronze of course, hollow-cast. And it would be gilded. Anything less would be unfit for such a man. Yes, that would do nicely.

But this was all obvious. Elementary, really. Any apprentice off the street could have come up with it. He needed the specifics. How did one appropriately immortalize an emperor?

Think.

Yes! Paulinus leapt to his feet and snatched a piece of the broken stylus from the ground.

A few years ago, the Empire had needed money to finance the war, and Marcus had sold palace treasures to raise the funds instead of levying a new tax. The auction had taken place in the Forum of Trajan. And in the Forum of Trajan stood a massive equestrian statue of the former Emperor Trajan himself. Paulinus had seen it often enough; everyone had. One looked at it and felt proud. Felt safe. Trajan atop his horse was the very picture of courage and honor and might.

Paulinus paced the room, tapping the wood repeatedly into his palm. The Senate wanted to commemorate the Emperor in war. He could do it. An emperor and his horse. It could work. It could be great.

The next few days were spent making preparations for the statue. When Paulinus went to pick out his bronze, the amount he asked for raised a few eyebrows.

“Big plans?” a disgruntled-looking man asked, waiting to purchase some of the metal himself.

“You could say that,” Paulinus replied, turning an Aurelian coin over and over in his hand as he waited. He planned to model the Emperor’s head after the one depicted on the coin.

With his supplies accounted for, he turned to designing the specifics of the figure itself. What expression would the Emperor have? What would he wear? Paulinus wanted to capture Marcus’s military prowess, but also his mind. The statue was to be an image of conquest and benevolence combined. He planned every aspect of it, almost excessively so.

And then he was ready to begin.

Because the statue was so large, Paulinus was forced to cast sections of it individually. The process took weeks. He covered each piece with wax and lined the inside of the wider ones with clay that could withstand the amount of heat he would need to apply. Once the wax could be removed, the pieces were cast and left to cool, then separated from any clay or tools affixed to them. In the end, the pieces were welded together, and Paulinus cleaned the newly-joined sections by chiseling and smoothing any excess bronze.

Piece by piece, the bronze man and his horse were coming together.

Paulinus, meanwhile, was coming undone. Over the weeks, the project had become an obsession. He took few breaks and cared for little beyond his work. Every time his slave came in with food or drink, he waved her away. Eventually he had to bar the door and ban interruptions altogether. Each night when he climbed into bed, his wife commented on his deplorable eating habits, and each night he promised he would eat more the next day. He never did.

Any sense of etiquette fell away as well. Twice, a messenger came from the Senate with instructions to view what progress had been made and report back to his superiors. Paulinus denied him entry to his workshop both times, declaring the statue unfit for anyone’s eyes other than his own. Only when a senator came himself did the sculptor allow him, with reluctance, to

see what he was working on. The senator seemed very pleased and tried to engage Paulinus in conversation, but when Paulinus only grumbled a few noncommittal sentences in response, he abandoned the attempt and left the sculptor to his work.

It took nearly four months for Paulinus to complete his masterpiece. In that time, things in Rome had slowly returned to normal, though Commodus still had not returned from the front. Marcus Aurelius continued to be honored; by the time Paulinus finally declared the statue complete, a new religious order had been established, and a golden statue of the late Emperor had been set up in the Curia.

It was decided that Paulinus's piece would be placed at the *Castra Prioria*, the barracks Trajan had built a few decades ago to house the emperor's mounted guards. The Forum Romanum had been suggested as another possible location, but the Senate decided against it when the point was raised that former Emperor Domitian's equestrian statue had once stood there. That statue had been torn down, and the Senate had no wish to associate Marcus with the disgraced Domitian by erecting a monument to him in the same spot.

All of the Senators were thrilled with Paulinus's work, and all agreed they had chosen their sculptor well. The gilded statue was enormous, its figures bigger than any living man or horse. Marcus's mount looked astonishingly lifelike, his broad neck arched and powerful. He wore a Sarmatian saddle cloth, but his rider went without a saddle. At the horse's feet a barbarian crouched, seemingly begging the Emperor not to crush him; despite Paulinus's extensive planning, he had decided a few weeks into construction that something was missing, and the idea of a cowering barbarian had come to him swiftly. Marcus himself was glorious, dressed in the civilian toga yet unmistakably regal in his bearing. He raised his right arm, his outstretched hand poised to command. The general consensus among the viewers was that the figure radiated calm authority, though Aufidius Victorinus once remarked that something about the expression in the Emperor's eyes gave him the impression of sorrow.

The piece was magnificent.

Paulinus hardly breathed as he watched his incredibly-heavy statue being erected in its new home, afraid that a rope would snap before the statue stood secure and everything would come toppling down. The workers were thorough in their setup, though; there were no accidents, and statue was raised onto its inscribed base without mishap. It was some time before Paulinus could walk away.

Now that his work was done, he found that he was starving. Much to the delight of his friends and his wife, he began to eat and sleep normally once more. People of all ages came to admire his statue and pay their respects to the former emperor. Paulinus himself visited

frequently, always half-convinced some tragedy would have befallen his work and always relieved to find the statue just as he had left it.

On this particular day, Paulinus thought Marcus looked especially radiant, his cloak sparkling in the light of the summer sun. The sculptor studied his work and smiled. His golden man. His bronze emperor.

He hoped it would last longer than he.

Three

Rome, 315

“This is all wrong,” declared the small man rifling through the plans on the table. “It should be twice that height.”

The worker beside him looked over dubiously. “But sir —”

“And it will be longer,” Servius continued, ignoring the interruption. “Like this.” He sketched a revised layout of the basilica quickly and easily. Once he was sure of the lines, he darkened them emphatically.

“Sir.” The worker sounded tired. “That will take more stone than we have. And we’ll have to take down parts of the foundation we’ve already set. Not to mention additional planning to make sure such a design would be structurally sound. And —”

“If the design had been rendered correctly the first time, Titus, there wouldn’t be a problem,” Servius retorted, looking up at last.

Titus hesitated, unsure of how to retain his job while reminding the court architect that he himself had drawn up the plans in the first place.

“Mediocrity is easy to attain,” said the architect, turning to appraise the construction in progress. “Greatness must be worked for. It takes brains, and strength, and certainly it takes time. Emperor Constantine has led us to greatness. It is therefore fitting that we honor his great work with great work of our own. Do you agree, Titus?”

“Of course, sir.” He really did.

“Then let us do our work. You say we’ll need more stone?”

“Yes, sir,” said Titus, relieved to hear the architect sounding sensible once more. “We don’t have enough columns to line the extended nave. We will also need more ornamentation. The artists could be asked to make more, but it would cost more, and take time.”

“Money is not a concern,” Servius asserted firmly. “There’s plenty of it. As for time, perhaps less so. What of the Trajanic reliefs?” A few weeks prior, Constantine and his architect had decided to experiment with reusing parts of old buildings. Columns were lifted, sculptures torn off.

“They’re in the process of being removed.”

“Good. We’ll have to scour the rest of his forum as well.”

“You wish to use them on the Lateran?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Best to have them on hand just in case. What was that sound?”

“I’ll go look, sir. Excuse me.”

Titus nodded and walked towards the commotion. The architect clutched his head and tried to remain calm. He needed a break from the basilica. What of the arch? He turned back to the table

and located the structure's plans. Three years ago, Constantine had become sole emperor when he defeated the rival Maxentius in battle at the Milvian Bridge. The Senate had decided to honor this victory with an arch, and it was the court architect's job to execute this plan. Constantine would be back in Rome in July for the festival. That meant they had only four months left to finish it.

Servius was tense.

Just as he decided to visit the arch, another crashing noise resounded through the square. There was yelling, followed by the reappearance of Titus. Servius watched his second-in-command hurrying over and groaned. The arch would have to wait until tomorrow.



The sun had barely risen when the court architect arrived at Constantine's arch. It had been a few days since he'd seen it last. Not much had changed since then, but he could tell things were shaping up nicely.

The usual model of a single arch had expanded, through his design, to three arches under one attic; two smaller arches attached to either side of the larger central one. Pilasters accented the walls that separated them, but soon real columns would stand there. A sizable rectangular area had been left blank at the top of both the north- and south-facing sides of the attic, waiting to be inscribed. What many of the workers found most striking about the arch, though, was the sheer number of reliefs it contained.

A huge amount of the monument was covered in sculptural reliefs. Medallions encircled symbolic figures. Battles raged in stone. Constantine himself appeared multiple times, addressing senators or distributing charity. Many of the scenes were crafted specifically for the arch by a workshop the court architect favored. Many, too, were taken from elsewhere.

Constantine held a particular admiration for former emperors Hadrian, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius. To him, they epitomized good leadership. Their reigns had produced a *saecula aurea*, a golden age, for Rome. This high regard was what had inspired his architect to reuse sculpture from the period; if one could borrow ideas, why not objects as well?

Looking at the arch now, Servius stared at the medallions surrounding Hadrianic scenes. In one, the former emperor was sacrificing to a god. In another, he hunted a large boar. At least, it used to be Hadrian doing these things. Now Constantine's head sat atop the body of the man he so admired.

Despite the large amount of sculpture already set onto the stone, Servius still felt that something was missing. He knew that a few reliefs of Trajan were in the middle of being extracted from their original settings; there was a long battle scene that he was particularly

excited about. He wanted to make this as grand a testament to Constantine as possible, though. Something that connected him with the great leaders of old. That meant adding more.

The answer was obvious: Marcus Aurelius. Thus far, he was absent from the arch. The architect had thought it would be enough without all three emperors of the *saecula aurea*, but now he thought of the gilded Marcus Aurelius statue that stood near the Lateran Basilica he was in the process of constructing and knew he had been wrong. Marcus in that statue was everything Constantine aspired to be: powerful and benevolent, strong and thoughtful. Sitting atop his mighty golden horse, he was eternally poised for command, forever guarding his city. He was immortal.

No, Marcus Aurelius belonged on Constantine's arch. The question was, where to find a suitable relief? The first structure that came to Servius's mind was the column honoring Marcus's triumph over the German tribes. Behind the column stood the Temple of Marcus Aurelius. Perhaps one of these would work, but he could not call any specific reliefs to mind. He needed to look at them again.

His mind made up, he left the arch just as quickly as he had come. The walk to the column was a long one to make on such a cold day, and the wind chilled the architect to his bones as he made his way across the Campus Martius. He was glad when at long last the column came into view.

He passed under the surrounding porticus and walked up to the towering monument. It was a magnificent work. The stone was covered in a frieze that wound its way around the column, depicting scenes from the wars that had consumed so much of Marcus's reign. Despite the monument's beauty, Servius could see immediately that it wouldn't be possible to use this relief, even in the tiny sections he had imagined; the scenes were too dependent on the shape of the column. Disappointed, he turned to the temple nearby. An inscription credited the structure to Commodus, who had dedicated the temple to his deified father following his father's death. There was nothing promising there either.

Admitting defeat, the architect trudged back to the basilica. Perhaps he would put off the arch for another day or two after all.

When he finally arrived back at the Lateran square, it looked just as he had left it, only things seemed much calmer today. His men were hard at work under Titus's careful supervision. There too was the equestrian statue, forever watchful. Things would be so much easier if it could just shrink and flatten into a panel-sized relief.

Titus made his way over. "Sir," he said by way of greeting.

"Things are running more smoothly today I trust?" asked Servius.

"Yes." He paused. "If I may, sir, you look... distressed. Are you still unhappy with the design?"

“No, no. I fixed that yesterday, keep up. It’s that damned arch that’s giving me trouble now.”

“The arch?” The relief in his voice was obvious. “What’s wrong with the arch?”

“Thankful that it isn’t your project at risk, are you? How nice that must be for you, to not have *your* neck on the line!”

“Calm down, sir. I didn’t say that. What’s wrong with the arch?”

The court architect eyed his second-in-command wearily before responding. “It needs more reliefs. Reliefs of Marcus Aurelius, to be exact. I looked at his column and —”

“His column? That isn’t going to work, sir. The shape is not consistent with that of the arch.”

“I *know* that, idiot! I just needed to be sure.”

Titus considered for a moment. “Why don’t you just look at his arch?”

Servius stared, stunned. The answer was so painfully obvious. Why had he not thought of it before? He really did need a break from work.

“If you like, sir, I can assess it for you —”

“Certainly not. Carry on, Titus.”

“Very good, sir.”

The two parted ways. Servius waited until Titus was back with the workers before leaving the site once more. Rest was what he needed, he grumbled to himself. More rest.

When he reached the Arch of Marcus Aurelius, its suitability to his needs was immediately evident. There was a wonderful panel depicting the emperor heading off to war that would be particularly useful. He searched the monument for another scene. The war scene would pay homage to Constantine’s military prowess, so he wanted one that would show another side... There. The emperor distributing largess. That would do nicely.

His emperor would be pleased with this.

Four

Three miles North of Rome, 487

“Look out!”

There was a snapping sound, followed by a booming crash. Feeling the earth rumble, Sergius whirled around and broke into a violent fit of coughing at the cloud of dust rising from the ground.

“Idiots!” shouted Iordanes. “Who didn’t secure it correctly?”

Iordanes was strong, clever, and the leader of the company. He was also arrogant, irritable, and a bully. Sergius avoided his gaze. He wasn’t at fault, but it was best to escape Iordanes’s notice whenever possible.

The dust began to settle, revealing the bronze statue that had fallen from the cart only a meter or so from where Sergius stood. He winced. It had been a very close call.

Iordanes, meanwhile, had apparently located the culprit. He took slow, deliberate steps towards Lazarus, a man just as big as his leader, but perhaps not as smart. Iordanes stopped in front of Lazarus, their faces nearly touching.

“Explain,” he ordered.

Lazarus held his gaze. “I tied the knots just as I’ve always done.”

“Except clearly you didn’t!” Iordanes shot back, his voice rising to a yell.

“I tied the knots just as I’ve always done,” Lazarus repeated, struggling to keep his voice level.

Iordanes grabbed Lazarus’s tunic and yanked him towards the statue lying in the dirt, tangled in the cloth that once covered it. It was a soldier with beautifully-rendered armor. “Then *why* is the bronze man on the ground?”

Lazarus made no reply, his eyes brimming with fury. Iordanes threw him to the ground and stomped back towards the cart. “Fix it,” he commanded to no one in particular.

Four men wordlessly grabbed the ropes and set to work. Lazarus got to his feet, his body rigid.

“Gentlemen,” Iordanes began, addressing the group. The four volunteers wrestled with the heavy statue. “Carelessness will not be tolerated in this company. It wastes time and damages the goods.” For as long as he’d been the leader of their company, Iordanes had always insisted upon the quality of their finds, even though they were going to melt down and sell everything they gathered anyway. He paused, considering. “What’s more, it’s dangerous.”

Oh no, thought Sergius. *Please, don’t.*

“Look at Sergius,” Iordanes continued. “He could have been killed! You aren’t ready to die yet, are you Sergius?” It wasn’t a question.

“I, uh...” Iordanes crossed his arms. Sergius desperately wished he could disappear as nine pairs of eyes bored into him. “No, sir,” he muttered as quietly as possible.

“You’re damn right you aren’t,” said Iordanes, sounding satisfied.

Sergius was spared from having to say any more as the statue was finally settled back onto the cart. Unable to resist any longer, he stole a glance at Lazarus. He was staring right back, looking murderous.

Sergius would not be sleeping much tonight.

With the stolen good secured and concealed in cloth once more, the company pushed on. The sun had begun to set, and they needed to reach the city by nightfall. Sergius understood why Iordanes had made such a fuss over the fallen statue. If anyone had been around to witness it lying exposed on the ground, he might easily have gone and informed someone of what was in the cart. It was lucky no —

“Over there!” Cyrus, a wiry, bearded fellow was pointing to a figure just discernible in the distance. The person was running.

“After him,” Iordanes ordered. Cyrus and two other men took off. “Alive!” he called as an afterthought.

Sergius swore under his breath. Had the man seen? They didn’t need officials on their tail.

The looters held their breath as they watched the chase. The man in the distance had had a large head start, but Cyrus’s long legs were built for speed. He overtook the witness and brought him to the ground. The others caught up shortly after, and soon they were hauling the prisoner back to the carts. The seconds dragged on.

When the party returned at last, the captured man was brought straight to Iordanes. The captured boy, Sergius realized. What had seemed like a full-grown man at a distance now looked to be no older than fifteen or sixteen years of age. His clothes were filthy, and his lip was bleeding. He looked painfully small next to Iordanes, but his eyes were lit with defiance.

“Well,” said the company leader, drawing himself to his full height and placing his hands behind his back. “Who is our new friend here?”

“He won’t say,” Cyrus replied gruffly.

Iordanes made a clucking noise with his tongue. “Shame. I’m sure Lazarus is sorry to hear that.”

Sergius glanced at Lazarus, who looked anything but sorry. A wicked grin crept across his face, reminding Sergius distinctly of a wild beast that had just spotted its next meal. Already a brute under normal circumstances, Lazarus was probably eager to seize this opportunity to distract from his earlier mishap.

The boy followed the others’ gazes to the giant man but refused to be intimidated. He muttered something that only Sergius, Iordanes, and one of the boy’s captors understood.

“Oh, a Roman,” said Iordanes. “How quaint.” He began speaking in Latin, excluding most of the men from the conversation. “Allow me to repeat myself: my colleague tells me you won’t give your name. Lazarus there is quite sorry to hear that.”

The boy’s look of surprise disappeared just as quickly as it had come. He nodded at Lazarus as he spoke again, louder now that he knew someone could understand him. “I’m surprised he can feel anything at all.” The man holding him sank his fist into the boy’s stomach, and the boy grunted at the impact.

“A smart-ass,” said Iordanes, his tone a combination of annoyance and boredom. “Tell me, smart boy, why were you running?”

The boy shrugged. “I felt like stretching my legs.”

“I see. No other reason?”

“No, why?” His tone was light, but his eyes betrayed him. They flashed quickly to the carts before returning to his inquisitor. The diversion lasted only a moment, but Sergius hadn’t missed it.

Neither had Iordanes. “Bind his hands,” he said, switching back to Gothic. Lazarus stepped forward, but the company leader shook his head. “Don’t you think you’ve tied enough knots for one day, Lazarus? Sergius, if you please.”

Once again, Sergius tried desperately hard not to look at Lazarus, and once again he failed. Lazarus was burning. He wondered if the brute would try to kill him tonight. It didn’t seem outside the realm of possibility.

The boy stared hard at Sergius the entire time his hands were being secured, but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. Whenever Sergius met the captive’s gaze, he was careful to keep his expression equally blank. It was difficult to guess what Iordanes planned to do with this boy, so it was best not to get involved. He felt Lazarus’s eyes still on him, probably looking for a mistake, so he made sure to knot the rope three times and gave it an extra tug when he was done, for good measure.

“Are you tying up a boy or a lion?” someone teased. Sergius laughed along with the rest of them, keeping his body loose. Iordanes clapped him on the shoulder and circled a pointed finger in the air, signaling for them to start moving again. Lazarus took hold of the end of the boy’s rope, and this time Iordanes said nothing. They continued on.

By keeping up a good pace, they were able to reach the north gate of Rome shortly after the sun had set. Sharp-eyed Felix spotted a more protected area about half a mile from the city walls, and Iordanes decided they should stop there for the night. The next day they would split up; some would stay with the carts, while others would roam the city for supplies and keep an eye

out for a good piece of bronze that might later be taken without much trouble. It would be harder to lift a statue from such a central city, but there was no harm in looking.

When Iordanes announced the need for someone to guard the prisoner, Sergius volunteered to take the first shift. With Lazarus still so angry, he didn't dare sleep. No one argued, and the company set up camp. Bits of food were passed around, though none were given to the boy. At first, no one built a fire, not wanting to call attention to themselves this close to the city. The nights were getting colder though, despite the sunny days, and eventually a small fire was deemed safe. Sergius set up his bedroll near the prisoner and watched the other men fade into the shadows.

With the others drifting off to sleep, Sergius finally had the opportunity to examine his charge. The dying embers shed just enough light to see by. The journey had clearly exhausted the boy, whose eyes now drooped. They hadn't traveled particularly far, but he was skinny and lacking muscle. His wrists were rubbed raw from being pulled along; Lazarus hadn't been kind on the other end of the rope. Every once in a while he would shake his head, trying not to fall asleep. He also stared pointedly at Sergius now and again, the best challenge it seemed he could muster.

Sergius waited until he was sure the others were asleep before voicing his question out loud. "Why were you so close?"

The boy raised his eyebrows. "You're talking to me?"

"If you prefer, I can talk to someone else. Lazarus, maybe." The boy's mouth narrowed into a thin line and he looked away. He recognized the name. "I want to know why you were so close to us," Sergius repeated. "We were far enough from the city that not many people were about. Were you following us?" The notion that someone might have been able to trail them without anyone noticing sickened Sergius.

"You know Latin?" the boy asked.

"That wasn't the question," Sergius replied. The words felt strange on his tongue, but he was sure of them. Iordanes thought it useful to have a couple of men that spoke the language of the Romans. Translation and business purposes.

When the boy didn't answer, Sergius pulled out a crust of bread. The prisoner yielded.

"There is a reward," he said quietly. "100 aurei, to anyone who can identify a bronze thief."

"And you followed us?"

"I need the money."

Sergius handed over the paltry food and considered. So someone *had* been able to trail them. It was a problem they couldn't afford to have. A problem *he* couldn't afford to have. He was not much for stealing statues, but there was nothing left for him at home. It was dangerous, but at least it was a life.

“Are they going to kill me?” the boy asked, feigning indifference.

“I don’t know,” Sergius replied. He really didn’t. His stomach wasn’t in it, but he was sure someone like Lazarus or Cyrus wouldn’t have a problem slitting the kid’s throat. Iordanes wouldn’t be so quick to kill, though. If the boy could be of any use to him, he would take it.

Neither of them said any more. The fire burned low, and they looked to the sky.

Sergius was tired the next day, but he had his orders. He and the other Latin-speaking man needed to get supplies for the company: food, fabric, rope, shoes, a knife or two. A couple of others went into the city as well, but they separated as soon as they passed through the gate. Scouting duty. No need to call attention to themselves.

The city was enormous. Five minutes was all Sergius needed to see that it would be difficult to steal anything worthwhile from this city. Even in its run-down state, there were too many people.

Throughout the course of the morning, he received some looks, but nobody approached. He had dressed in Roman clothing, the origins of which he didn’t like to think about, but it may have been unnecessary; since the city had been sacked, he guessed it had seen its fair share of people like him.

After he had gotten everything he came for, he let himself wander. He could tell the city was only a shade of its former glory. Buildings were crumbling. Businesses looked to be suffering. People coughed in the streets. He wondered briefly if the boy had a family who would be missing him. Judging by the kid’s malnourished frame, he guessed not.

A glimmer to his right caught his eye, and he paused. There was a massive bronze statue, some man and his horse. A figure crouched beneath the horse’s raised front hoof. Sergius walked over to get a better look at the statue, shining gold in the October sun. What a prize this would be! It was easily worth four times as much as the bronze man sitting in their cart. Looter though he was, even Sergius could appreciate the exquisiteness of the craftsmanship, not to mention the sheer size of the thing.

He wondered if any of the others had already happened upon it, but it didn’t matter. It was just too big to take. Sergius took one last look at the statue and walked away. Whoever the bronze man was, he was lucky.

Five

Ravenna, 801

Charlemagne had forgotten how beautiful Ravenna was. It had been many years since he was here last, and the splendor of the churches seemed to have grown richer in his absence. Fourteen years ago, the newly-crowned Roman Emperor had received permission from the Pope to lift marble from a palace in this city. Now he stood in the Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, flanked by two enormous guards and gazing upward.

It was a broad church, the nave lined with rounded arches that reminded the Emperor of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Sant'Apollinare was not as big, but Charlemagne thought the mosaics lining its walls were some of the finest he had seen. Thousands upon thousands of stones sparkled in shafts of sunlight, bringing their figures to life. Prophets and saints adorned in white and gold processed along the strip of wall topping the arches, the grass beneath their feet a rich shade of green. Higher up still were images from the life of Christ: miracles, the Passion, the Resurrection. In some places, the mosaics seemed to have been modified, and the placement of former emperor Justinian's name beside a central figure on the wall suggested who was behind these changes. Large and full of color, the scenes were mesmerizing, and it was some time before Charlemagne pulled himself, and his guards, away. Their footsteps echoed throughout the great hall as they crossed back through the nave and exited the church.

Outside, attendants and additional security rushed him all at once.

"Was your visit to your satisfaction, my Lord Emperor?"

"Is there someplace else you were hoping to see?"

"I fear we may fall behind schedule if we delay much longer, my Lord."

Charlemagne waved away all except the man who'd spoken last. This one had a more genuine presence than the majority of his attendants. He was of average height and build, with eyes so dark they were nearly black, and the hair to match. He wasn't particularly smart, but he spoke the truth, and though he had a tendency to whine and occasionally bordered on impertinence, Charlemagne liked him enough to remember his name.

"Walk with me, Joseph," he commanded with only a hint of annoyance. If he was to be bothered, better by this man than one of the others.

The attendant bowed hastily and nudged his way through the guards. Charlemagne led the small party over to the palace nearby. The Emperor had visited it once before, when he took materials from it to reuse in his own palace. All of this had once belonged to Theodoric, a man Charlemagne greatly admired. King of the Ostrogoths, and later all of Italy, Theodoric had held enormous power about three hundred years ago. Yet he had ruled with dignity and grace, taking his responsibilities seriously. One of his major concerns had been fixing up cities by salvaging

precious buildings and monuments; Charlemagne had read plenty of Cassiodorus and was familiar with these exploits.

The attendant cleared his throat. “My Lord Emperor —”

“I want you to do something for me, Joseph,” Charlemagne interrupted.

“Certainly, my Lord —”

“Shut your mouth and open your eyes. We are in the presence of greatness. Cease your complaining lest you disturb his ghost.”

Joseph did as he was told, frustration bouncing off of him in waves. Charlemagne couldn’t decide if he found it amusing or irritating. He quickly forgot the attendant, though, as they passed under the colonnade and into the courtyard fronting the building. Nobody tried to stop the Emperor as he entered the palace.

The building seemed to have fallen into disuse since his previous visit. Whereas before it had maintained a more or less public presence in the city, housing powerful people as they passed through, now it was empty. Even devoid of life, though, the rooms were magnificent. Charlemagne took his time exploring the abandoned structure, taking in as many details as he could. This place was certainly fit for a king. Especially striking was a particular dining hall with a deep apse. Mosaics covered its dome, a hundred shades of blue and green mirroring the sea that could be seen far in the distance. The group lingered a few moments more before moving on.

Despite the impressiveness of his surroundings, Charlemagne couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed. He had stopped in Ravenna on the way to Francia in the hopes of finding a relic of the past that he could take with him. His efforts to revive the Early Christian Roman Empire were accompanied by a fierce desire to identify himself with the greatest emperors of old, and what better way to link him to this heritage than to surround himself with symbols of the time? Thus far, however, he hadn’t come across anything he could take.

When they had toured the entire palace, the group slowly made their way down to an exit. It was different than the one they had used to enter the building and led into an idyllic courtyard. They crossed it in rather low spirits, the Emperor’s mood souring the company. A large gate loomed ahead, and through it they could see the plaza that connected the palace to the church.

“Is everything all right, my Lord Emperor?” Joseph asked, speaking for the first time since his master had silenced him. Charlemagne briefly contemplated complaining about coming up empty-handed, but he decided such an action would seem petty for an emperor. As they passed through the gate, he took one last glance at the palace behind him.

And stopped.

Standing outside the gate was an enormous statue of what could only be Theodoric on his horse. The king held a shield in one hand and a spear in the other, poised for battle, while his mount stood frozen in a running stance. Both the horse and his rider were made of the most

glorious gilded bronze. Beneath and around the pair were a few other figures, assuming various positions and overall less impressive than the two towering over them. All of these rested on a large stone pedestal. Charlemagne stared. And stared.

“My Lord?”

The word drew him from his thoughts. “Speak,” he commanded, keeping his eyes fixed on the statue before him.

“Apologies, my Lord Emperor, but I fear we really might fall behind schedule if we delay any longer.”

“Do you know why we’ve stopped?” asked Charlemagne.

“I can’t say that I do, my Lord.”

“What do you make of this statue?” The Emperor nodded toward the object of his study.

“It is... splendid, my Lord. Quite the achievement.”

“Who do you suppose the man was?”

“A general perhaps, my Lord?”

“Joseph, do not speak unless you can contribute to the conversation. An ordinary general commemorated in a statue, especially one of this size? Unlikely. Think of where we are. For God’s sake, read the name in the inscription on the pedestal.”

“It is —”

“Yes?”

“— King Theodoric, my Lord.”

“Correct, Joseph.”

Perhaps *this* was an object he could take with him. Charlemagne’s heart raced at the thought. Theodoric hadn’t been an emperor, but he had ruled Rome - and the rest of Italy - nevertheless. He belonged to a noble tradition that Charlemagne felt he deserved to be a part of. What’s more, the statue called to mind two other equestrian monuments that he had seen before. The first was a statue of former Byzantine emperor Justinian; he and his horse sat atop a massive column that stood outside the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The second was the statue of Constantine that stood outside the Lateran Basilica in Rome. That too was made of gilded bronze. Charlemagne had admired it during his visit to Rome the previous winter, when the Pope had crowned him Emperor of Rome. A statue of Theodoric was pleasing enough, but if it bore resemblance to a Roman monument as well, it became exceptional. The Emperor made up his mind.

“Joseph, I am going to take this statue back to Aachen. Let us go and alert the others.”

“Aachen, my Lord?” Aachen was where Charlemagne had a palace complex not so different from this one. It was in Francia.

“Once again you are correct, Joseph. That’s twice in a row, now. You’re doing well.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” the attendant replied after a beat, detecting the slight but unable to defend himself.

Charlemagne felt vaguely disappointed by the man’s response. An argument would perhaps lift his spirits even more. No matter. He led his men back to the front of the church. The rest of the company snapped to attention when they saw their Emperor returning. At a nod from Charlemagne, Joseph hurried ahead to inform the others of the Emperor’s wishes. There was a quick debate, followed by a division of labor. Some men produced rope, while others found the wood they had been dragging along for just this purpose.

The next few hours were spent preparing the statue to be moved. A support had been put up on one side of the monument, and ropes were secured all around the horse and rider. It had been decided that they would leave the pedestal and additional figures behind; those would only add extra time and weight to the process. The plan was to tilt and lower the bronze statue as gently as possible onto the support. It would then be rolled over the logs and onto a sturdy cart. The sun was halfway to the horizon when the team was finally ready. They needed to move as quickly as possible in order to get it done before dark.

The men gave a shout and pulled on both sides of the monument, aiming to find a balance that would turn the statue by degrees. The bronze groaned as it shifted. Many of the men who stood watching covered their ears. Charlemagne rested his hands behind his back and smiled. For him it was the sweetest music.

Six

Rome, 966

It was light out when they came for him.

The city prefect knew they would be looking for him. Word of the emperor's arrival had traveled fast. But not fast enough; by the time he had learned of the danger he was in, there were guards posted at every gate to the city. Escape was impossible. Now it was only a matter of time before he was found.

He had spent the night in an inconspicuous hovel set into the corner of a small street. He did not doubt that it would be his last night alive. In the darkness he had been torn between a fierce desire to remain awake and a longing to sink into the refuge of sleep. To spend these last few hours treasuring every breath, every star in the sky, every moment his body was free of pain, or to close his eyes and take his final chance to dream. In the end, sleep was unattainable. He had been awake for hours when he heard the heavy footsteps outside his door.

The soldiers did not bother knocking. After three kicks the door flew open. The prefect was spotted instantly; there was nowhere to hide in this tiny space. He knew it was pointless to fight, but still he struggled instinctively against his captors as they moved to bind his limbs. A few swift blows were delivered to his midsection, and he stopped resisting. They refastened his bonds and dragged him out into the sunlight.

Soldiers held the man on both arms and thrust him forward relentlessly. The ropes around his ankles prohibited him from moving his feet more than a few inches apart, and he lost his balance more than once. Each time he fell, he was kicked, so he tried to focus only on the ground in front of him, to keep the pace and remain standing.

"Petro!" somebody called out once. A man's voice. The prefect wasn't sure who had called his name. No doubt that person would be punished later for his association with the traitor. Petro knew he was being watched as they processed through the streets but kept his eyes down. For him, the humiliation stung more than the soldiers' blows.

It was a long journey, and Petro was almost relieved when at last he was thrown into a prison cell. With his limbs bound, he was unable to brace himself for the fall and hit the floor hard, landing on his shoulder. The prefect clenched his teeth against the pain, determined not to give his captors the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. When he heard the door to his cell being locked, he rolled over and looked up in time to see the soldiers disappear down the hall. At least now he could suffer in privacy.

"Who's there?" The quiet voice came from somewhere down the hall. Petro recognized its owner immediately: Franco, a city consul and close friend. So they'd taken the others, too. "Who's there?" Franco repeated. "Who did they get next?"

Petro didn't answer. He didn't want his friends to know he had been captured, to picture him so disgraced. Franco did not call out again.

Soldiers returned that afternoon. They did not stop at Petro's cell, but continued further down the hall. Petro remained where he was against the wall; he had no desire to look through the small barred window and try to catch a glimpse of whichever poor soul was being taken. Whoever the man was, he went silently. Petro wondered if he was on his way to an execution.

The noise of the soldiers returning a while later told him that the prisoner was still alive. It sounded like he was being dragged, and he cried out twice. There was a faint thud as the prisoner was deposited back in his cell, and the sound of the door being locked echoed through the chamber.

Another cell was opened, and another prisoner was taken away. The one that had just returned was moaning pitifully and continued to do so even after the latest prisoner was returned and yet another one taken away. How many were in the prison, and what was going on?

Petro didn't find out until the next morning. The soldiers did not speak when they opened his door, just pulled him to his feet and pushed him forward. He had not consumed anything other than water since the night before his capture, and his stomach felt hollow and achy. Stiff muscles made it difficult to walk, and he stumbled frequently. More kicks, and then finally, he was led outside.

They stopped at a flat bit of land with four posts stuck into the ground. A soldier cut his bonds and ordered him to undress. Powerless to do otherwise, Petro did as he was told. His face burned with shame as he shed his clothes in front of the men and cast them into a pile at his feet.

"On your back," growled the same soldier, nodding to the ground. Helpless, Petro laid down with his face to the sky. The sun was shining brilliantly, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. He felt hands grab him and saw his wrists and ankles being tied to the posts. A feeling of dread trickled up his spine, and he tried not to let it evolve into panic. So this is what had been happening with the other men. Torture. Would he be whipped? Eaten alive by wild animals? He felt tears spring to his eyes at the thought and fought them back, trying to brace himself for what came next. But the soldiers did not touch him. They just walked away.



Heat. Everything was heat.

Petro struggled against his bonds in vain, longing to roll over, desperate to turn away from the sun. He was still on his back, and had been for the past two days. All four limbs remained tied to posts in the ground, the ropes drawn so tightly as to allow only a half inch of movement in

any direction. Every few hours the bonds were tightened a little more. Soon they would cut off circulation, and his hands and feet would become useless and purple and dead, dead before he was. His skin too, it burned and burned. His body was dying from the outside in, just as the outside was killing him.

But this heat! This relentless, insufferable, *eternal* heat. What he would give for a moment, a *moment*, of respite. The tiniest sliver of a cloud would do, but the sky had remained clear since he'd been brought outside, and the nights were just as sweltering. Exhaustion tugged at his consciousness. He longed for the relief that sleep would bring, but sleep was far out of reach. His was too aware of every bead of sweat, every breath of warm air that filled his lungs. He had been given no food or water and could feel his stomach eating itself, gnawing away at it piece by piece. He was drowning, he was sure of it, drowning on land. Drowning in heat, sweat, hunger, exhaustion, agony. How did it come to this?

Half-formed images blurred together in his mind. The Pope. They had captured the Pope and held him briefly in the Castel Sant'Angelo before casting him out of the city. For eleven months, Rome was free again, and life was good. The people had succeeded, and he had led them to victory. But then the Pope had returned. So had the Emperor. And they wanted blood.

When the soldiers returned on the third day with an important-looking man, Petro confessed everything.



This time, Petro's captors didn't bother holding him by the arms as they marched him forward. His sunburned skin screamed with every step, and he no longer had the energy to run away. He hardly had the energy to remain upright.

After he had confessed to leading a rebellion against the Pope, his wrists and ankles had been freed, and he'd been dragged back to his cell. A dirty set of clothes, a cup of water and a slice of bread were waiting in his cell. He downed the water in an instant, practically inhaling it. The bread too was gone in a few bites, but he vomited it back up immediately. When another slice was brought a while later, he forced himself to eat as slowly as he could. The bread stayed down.

Now he was being led to the Lateran Basilica. Why? A crowd of people had gathered, at the front of which stood many of the consuls that had participated in the rebellion. Petro tried to carry himself a little taller as the soldiers ordered the crowd to make way. When a space had been cleared, they led the prisoner through the sea of people. Those Romans, whom Petro had tried to help. For whose sake he and his friends were now being punished. No one said a word. Not one tried to save him.

The prefect was stopped beside Franco, whose hands and feet were also bound. His friend had a long red mark on one of his cheeks and stared at him with wide eyes.

The people bowed when the Pope appeared. A spark of fury kindled deep in Petro's heart as the man he had expelled from the city sauntered towards the prisoners and stopped before them.

"Men," he said in a loud voice, so all could hear him. "If it is even right to call such defilers of God men. You have been charged with treason, and all here have confessed. Your actions nearly destroyed Rome, and therefore Rome is here" - he gestured to the crowd - "to witness your punishment." The Pope paused and locked eyes with every man but the city prefect, reciting their names as he went down the line. Petro held his breath. "You are sentenced to a life of exile." They would live! "You will live out the remainder of your pitiful lives in Germania, never again to walk the streets of Rome, never again to..." Petro stopped listening. He felt a flicker of hope. Then he heard his name.

The prefect looked up, and all hope vanished instantly. The Pope was looking at him with eyes hard as flint, and everything about him conveyed his complete and utter hatred for the man he had once trusted to keep order in his city.

"In all the days I knew you, Petro, you never struck me as traitor. I was confident I had made the right decision in appointing you city prefect. I was wrong. I should have seen you for the rat that you are." The prisoner did not flinch. He stared right back, just as angry as the man condemning him. The Pope pronounced his judgement. "You will be hung from the statue of Constantine."

Petro's heart froze as his eyes darted to the bronze horse and rider standing nearby. He wasn't ready to die, much less by hanging. He—

Soldiers grabbed him before he could think. His instinct was to fight back, to do anything but take step after step towards the statue that would end his life, but he resisted the urge. He refused to look weak. The crowd was completely silent. Only when Petro reached the base of the enormous statue did somebody speak again. The Pope.

"Shave his beard."

A man with a knife approached, and someone in the mass of people laughed. Petro gritted his teeth. Bastard. Another shouted his name mockingly, and more took up the call. Supporters of the Pope? Or people he had fought for? It was impossible to know.

The man that shaved Petro's beard did not try to be careful, and the prefect winced as the blade cut his face. When the job was complete, another man approached with a rope. Petro's heart slammed against his ribcage. There it was. All he had seen, all he had done, and here his life was to be ended by a bit of horse hair.

The urge to resist was now too strong to suppress, but he struggled in vain. Soldiers held him so tightly that he could not move an inch. The man with the rope stopped in front of him and placed the rope between his knees. Petro held his gaze.

The man yanked the prefect's hair up, gathering it all into one long bundle. Petro gasped at the sudden pain. When all the hair was together, the man held it securely in one hand and reached down to grab the rope with the other. He then tied one end of the rope around the bundle of hair, knotting it thoroughly. What was he doing?

The other end of the rope was slung up and over the bronze horse's head. A few men grabbed it on the other side. Then they pulled.

Petro had never felt such pain in his life as he did being lifted into the air by his hair. He could not help it— he screamed. And screamed. Once his feet were well off the ground, the men holding the rope tied it down nearby. There was noise among the crowd. People talked. The statue held. Petro hung.

He had no idea how long he hung for. It could have been minutes. It could have been days. He could not think. He could hardly see. The pain was absolutely blinding. A thousand tiny blades were piercing his skull, all at once. His head pounded furiously, gathering strength as time went on. The noises coming from his mouth were not human. Tears swam in his eyes, painting his cheeks red with smears from his bloody face. He was not ready to die. He wanted to die.

There was not much relief at first when Petro's rope was cut and he fell to the ground. His skull still screamed as his hair slowly, slowly relaxed back into place. The Pope's voice rang out, and Petro was given no time to recover before men hoisted him onto the back of a donkey, facing backwards. His body lurched forward as his hands were tied underneath the tail, and his head was still reeling when someone led the donkey on. Soldiers stood in front and in back, and the group left the square.

They were onto the first street when something smashed into the prefect's back with astonishing force. The donkey flinched but was held steady. Out of the corner of his eye, Petro glanced a man with a rod, grinning savagely and raising it to strike again. There was no way to brace himself for the impact as Petro felt the instrument slam down once more. He cried out in agony.

But it was far from over. Lash after lash he endured, people whipping him as he was led through the streets of Rome. Rome. His city. His home. His blood splattered the walls.

Petro lost consciousness for a time. When he came to, he was back in the Lateran square. The prefect spat out a mouthful of blood and tried to sink into the merciful blackness once more. But someone splashed water on his face, and he opened his eyes with a shock.

The donkey stopped, and Petro looked up to see the Pope standing beside him.

"You will join the others in exile," he said with a wicked smile.

Petro's hands were released, and he fell to the ground.

Seven

Rome, 985

Enough.

The word echoed in Fino's head long after the crowd had ceased chanting it. The dark-haired man idly ran a heavy dagger along his sword yet again, staring out at the mass of people that stood murmuring in the street. In the light of the setting sun, the screech of metal on metal did nothing but earn him a few appreciative glances from those around him.

"I think that blade is as sharp as it's going to get," one of his companions remarked, his husky laugh resounding in the quiet. Fino glanced back at his friend and grinned.

"Marco's right, you're being too kind," added another. "The cuts will be too clean."

"A sharp blade means precision, gentlemen," Fino said in reply. "I don't do sloppy work. And believe me, I can still make him hurt." The wicked gleam in his eye frightened no one. They wouldn't be on the receiving end of his knives tonight.

"Look here," an older man interrupted, coming to Fino's group and brandishing his axe. "We're ready t' go. What are we standing 'round here for?"

"Patience, Leonzio," said Marco, not without amusement.

"Bah!" growled the old man, waving his words aside.

Fino sheathed his sword and returned the dagger to his belt. "We wait for the signal," he said, a hint of warning in his voice. Leonzio was becoming increasingly unhinged these days, and the last thing Fino wanted was for him to get it into his head that he ought to take matters into his own hands. He would not send him home, though; the man had provided a crucial voice of resistance against the Pope these past few months, bringing many people to their side. He had earned the right to partake in the execution.

"Signal be damned. We're gonna lose our chance!"

"We wait."

Leonzio huffed and stomped away. Fino was debating calling him back when a young lad came tearing around the corner. He didn't appear daunted by the size of the crowd as he skidded to a halt in front of Fino and his companions.

"He's out," the boy announced breathlessly, his hands on his knees. "Boniface. He's out of the palace."

"How many guards?" demanded Enzo, Fino's younger brother.

"Six."

"Which means there will be at least eight. There are always a few out of sight."

"More than eight," Fino guessed. "Boniface isn't an idiot. He knows his popularity wanes."

"He only goes for a walk by his own palace!" the boy protested.

Fino looked down at him. "One who enslaves others can never be free himself. Boniface has made many enemies. He can't let his guard down for an instant, or else he is a fool."

"Let us hope he is a fool, then," said Marco. There was nothing light in his tone now.

Fino's friends looked at him steadily. Waiting for him to begin. When had he become their leader? Leonzio flashed in the corner of his vision, spurring Fino onward. The old man was right: they had to hurry, or they risked losing their chance. He felt a tug on his arm just as he raised it to call the crowd to order and saw that the boy had brought him a wooden box to stand on. He was a good lad; his parents would have been proud, if he had had any. Fino patted his head and stepped up.

Looking out into the sea of faces, Fino realized it wasn't necessary to call for attention; everyone was already staring at him. Sixty or so men, armed and ready to march. The time had come.

"Brothers," he called out. "You all know why we've gathered. Boniface is an affront to the papacy, an insult to the city, and a disgrace to the name of Christianity. He thinks he can hide behind his powerful benefactors, but no longer. Even his precious Crescentii cannot help him now. Both of his reigns began with murders, and so it is fitting that this one shall end with another. This time, it will be his own!" The crowd yelled their assent. "Let him feel the same pain his predecessors felt when he slaughtered them without pity. Let him see death before his eyes and know that nothing and no one can stop it!" More shouting. "And when his guards have fallen, and the streets run red, and he is broken and bleeding and begging for mercy, we will shout the names of those he wronged and demand to know what mercy they were given!" The crowd roared, and Fino knew they were ready. "So let us fight, my brothers. Let us bring an end to this torturous reign. Arise! For the people, for Rome, for God Himself!"

The men cheered and beat their weapons together as Fino stepped down from the box. A couple of them clapped him on the back. Then they moved.

The walk to the Lateran palace could not have lasted more than a few minutes, but every second felt like a lifetime. The boy had run ahead to spy and report back on the pope's exact whereabouts. People stared at the mob as it passed, most of them hurrying away at the sight. No one tried to stop it. The couple of guards stationed in their path were disposed of quickly. Fino and the other men in charge insisted on silence in the group as they approached; the element of surprise gave them a crucial advantage, and its loss would be devastating to their mission.

Marco was the first to spot the boy returning. The company halted as their spy told them in a hushed voice where exactly the Pope was walking. He was still out, and the number of guards had not changed. It appeared their movement had not yet been discovered, but it wouldn't be long before it was. They needed to go now.

The company walked a few more paces before breaking out into a run. Silent or not, they would never be able to hide the sound of sixty men approaching; better to reach the Pope before he was able to escape back inside. Fino rounded the corner at the head of the pack and spotted their target, just as their target spotted them. The Pope's fear and astonishment were plainly visible even from the distance that grew smaller with every step. His guards shouted for reinforcements and formed a protective circle around their charge, desperately trying to usher him to safety. They were hopelessly outnumbered, though, and Fino's men fell upon them like water breaking upon rocks.

Enzio killed the first guard, disarming him with a kick to the stomach before driving his sword through his throat. To their right, one of Fino's men fell to the ground with his hands clutching his side, the hilt of a dagger protruding from a gaping wound. Someone screamed in rage and launched himself at his friend's attacker, beating the guard back with savage blows before slicing him through the middle. Leonzio barked orders at the men around him, and they immediately encircled the tangle of guards, ensuring that no outside force interfered. The Pope's men were strong, but they didn't stand a chance against such numbers. The five extra guards that ran to their aid were cut down by those on the outer ring of the circle. Fino himself was part of this outer ring and ducked as an enormous sword swung over his head, barely missing him. In an instant he was upright and parrying his opponent's blows. Marco materialized and slit the guard's calves, and wordlessly Fino finished him off. All of the Pope's men were now dead. Fino's men were alert, but still. His brother called his name.

Fino pushed his way to the center of the crowd, Marco following right behind him. A space had been cleared, and in it lay Boniface, grabbing at his bloodied legs and gnashing his teeth against the pain. He looked up as Fino emerged, sensing authority in his walk and the way the men looked at him.

"Do you mean to kill me, then?" the Pope demanded, spit flying from his mouth. Fino paused for a moment, then drove a knife into the man's thigh. Boniface screamed.

"Slowly," Fino replied.

No one tried to stop him as he slammed his boot down on the Pope's hand, shattering it.

"Who are you?" Boniface cried out. Fino gave him a look of pure hatred.

"I am Benedict VI," he said, slicing Boniface's arm. "I am John XIV!" he shouted, drawing his sword across Boniface's chest. "I am everyone else that you have hurt." A cut across his face. "I am Roma!"

And he slit the Pope's throat.

There was no cheering when the Pope was killed. Only grim satisfaction.

Ropes were tied around Boniface's limbs. By this point, people had come to investigate. Faces peeked out from behind corners and objects littering the square. No more palace guards emerged.

The company processed through the city, dragging the body of the Pope along with them. His clothes were torn, and his wounds ripped wider, as they pulled him across the cold ground. By the time they circled back to the palace, Boniface was hardly recognizable.

They stopped where they had begun: in the Lateran square. Leonzio took one look at the muddied, blood-stained corpse and spit on it. The action seemed to spawn a second wave of violence. Men kicked and cut the body, tore off the remaining clothing and flung curses into the air. When the last man had satisfied his anger, the mutilated corpse was dumped at the base of the equestrian statue that stood nearby. The metal barbarian crouched at the horse's feet looked like he was preparing to suffer the same fate. Enzo patted the horse's leg.

"Justice," he said, looking out at the men around him.

"Justice," they repeated.

The sun had sunk almost completely below the horizon. Fino chuckled in the growing darkness.

"Well men," he said, "I think we've earned ourselves a drink."

Eight

Rome, 1320

Paolino da Venezia wished the world would stop spinning. It was distracting him from something he needed to do. What was it he needed to do? Oh, yes. Work. He needed to get back to work. He would go now.

“Whoa there, lad. Had a bit more than you can handle?”

Who was speaking to him? More importantly, why was he suddenly on the goddamn floor? Before he could properly gauge the situation, he felt himself being lifted.

“Watch it!” said one of the men supporting him, narrowly avoiding a swinging punch. Shaking off his helpers, Paolino stumbled out of the inn, muttering a string of obscenities.

The sun was blinding, and Paolino had to stop and wait for his eyes to adjust. It hardly did him any good when they did, though; nothing around him looked familiar. He tried taking a few steps forward, but his legs buckled and he hit the ground hard. Someone made a disgusted noise nearby, clearly not impressed with this twenty-something year old too drunk to walk in the middle of the day. Paolino would have said something nasty in response, had his face not been scrunched up with pain.

When he sat up after what might have been seconds or minutes, the image before him continued to puzzle him. It didn’t make sense. He had spent the last three weeks studying the city. He’d walked it, lived it, memorized it as best he could. So why couldn’t he figure out where he was?

It was time to get back to work. Paolino staggered to his feet and tried to think rationally. He didn’t know where he was, but chances were, somebody would be able to tell him. Yes. He would ask for directions.

Paolino set out in an arbitrary direction. He passed a few people but dismissed them all as ignorant at a glance. The city was emptier than it ought to have been. Famine had ravaged the population in recent years, and now one was nearly as likely to encounter a pilgrim as a Roman. Thousands of people filtered in and out of Rome, and it seemed most locals nowadays made their livings catering to these travelers; streets were littered with inns and prayer shops.

It was one of these prayer shops that Paolino set his eye on. It was rather small, with a nondescript storefront. He walked in without hesitation.

The store was practically drowning in prayer beads. Hundreds of them lined the walls, covering every surface and stuffing every corner. The sunlight magnified their brilliance, a myriad of colors bathing in the warm light. Many looked to be made of bone, but there were also beads of ivory, amber —

“Can I help you?”

Paolino yanked back the hand he hadn't realized was extended, accidentally brushing against the wall in the process. Beads showered onto the floor.

The shopkeeper that had spoken before cried out in dismay and rushed to the scene as quickly as his old bones would allow. Paolino covered his ears, the drumming of beads reverberating painfully against his skull. Such commotion! Why had he come in here?

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" the shopkeeper called after him. Paolino stopped and swiveled round. "You're going to have to pay for these!"

"Me? I don't have the money!" At the moment, Paolino couldn't exactly remember if this was true or not, but he liked the way it sounded anyway.

"Then you'll work it off."

"I already have a job."

"Destroying other people's property?"

Paolino felt this wasn't fair. "That isn't fair," he said.

The old man said nothing, just continued picking up broken pieces from the floor. Paolino again considered leaving, but the sight of the shopkeeper on his knees stirred a flicker of pity into his heart. He ambled back over and slid to the floor, sitting with his back against the now-empty wall space.

"How long have you had this shop?" he asked, making no move to help clean up.

The shopkeeper remained silent.

"Do you make the strings of beads yourself?"

Again, nothing.

"I make things. Well, I make maps. I'm a mapmaker. A maker of maps. Strange word when you think about it, map. Why's it called a map?" The man looked up, his face lined with irritation and exhaustion. Paolino took in his graying features and laughed. "What a face! The kind that deserves to be painted. I think I like you. I don't like many people, but I like you. Does that please you?" He wasn't really sure why he was talking so much. He generally hated speaking. And interacting with people in general. They tended to disappoint him.

The shopkeeper stared at him apathetically. "It would please me if you left."

"He offends me! I really should go. Hey," said Paolino, reminded of something. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"You are in my shop, bothering me."

"I mean where in Rome. I should know, seeing as I'm making a map of the city, but I seem to have forgotten."

"You want to know?"

"I want to know."

"Then pay for the beads."

Paolino was becoming irritable again.

“I don’t have the money.”

“You haven’t even checked your purse yet.”

The two stared at each other for a good deal of time. Finally, the shopkeeper made to snatch the mapmaker’s purse from his waist, but Paolino pulled away.

“Thief! *I’ll* check.”

He opened the cloth bag and was disappointed.

“I don’t have the money,” he said weakly.

“Idiot. I heard the coins clinking together the second you walked in. Practically begging to be robbed. Hand them over.”

Unable to think of another excuse, Paolino did as he was told. His stomach had begun to hurt, and he wasn’t much in the mood for talking anymore.

“Follow the aqueduct,” said the shopkeeper, collecting what he was due. “It ends pretty close to the city wall. There’s a gate there, too. With any luck you’ll pass through it and not bother anyone again.”

The young mapmaker struggled to his feet, and the shop began to spin. Damn old man and his sorcery. Paolino snatched his purse from the shopkeeper’s outstretched hand and refastened it onto his belt. For a moment, he wondered if he should apologize for making a mess, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. He left instead.

The aqueduct was visible from the shopfront. Paolino made his way over, bumping into a couple of people in the process. They grumbled indignantly, reminding him of his dislike for humans once more. His mood was fully soured by the time he reached the brick arches.

Paolino followed the aqueduct for some time, taking in his surroundings as he went. The city had fallen into disrepair ever since the Pope had moved to France a few years back. Fewer people visited Rome in his absence, and the depletion of this source of revenue affected inhabitants and structures alike. Old buildings became shades of their former glory, and people became shades of their former selves.

The farther Paolino walked, the more he registered. The fresh air helped sober him up. That, and the time he stopped and vomited. The fog clouding his mind began to lift in degrees, and the world spun a little less.

He stopped short when the equestrian statue came into view. Of course! Paolino hastily made his way over to the bronze figures. Here was Constantine and his horse, ready to trample or spare the figure crouching at their feet. The metal looked worn and was damaged in places, but the monument was impressive nonetheless. Paolino looked up and saw the Basilica di San Giovanni, just as he expected to. His surroundings had become familiar once more, thanks to the bronze

man. A thought occurred to him: if the statue had told him where he was, surely it could do the same for others? He clapped his hands together. Yes, he would put the statue on his map.

Satisfied with this plan, Paolino headed out in what he now knew was the right direction. He needed to get back to work, but perhaps there was time for one more drink. He reached into his purse to see how much money he had left, only to find it completely empty.

Some damned idiot must have robbed him.

Ten

Rome, 1347

1 August

Lisabetta couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed. Her city was not a happy one. Power-hungry barons used the streets as their own personal battlefield, building towers and tearing down the opposition. Fires raged frequently. There wasn't enough food. There wasn't enough money. The Pope's presence would have helped, but the Pope wasn't there. He was too busy cowering in Avignon under the shadow of the French king.

For sixteen years, her husband had provided a sort of buffer between her and the outside world. As a shoemaker, he wasn't rich, but he never stopped trying to make his wife smile. Then he died, just over a year ago, and a little light inside her had gone out. She had married too young, and loved him less than he loved her, but he was a good man, and she had been content. Looking at her surroundings now, she could imagine the look on his face if he were here with her. He would be grinning from ear to ear, just like everyone around her.

The space in front of San Giovanni in Laterano was flooded with people from all over the city. Men and women, young and old, had flocked to see the festivities and join in the celebration. It was the Feast of St. Peter in Chains, and the newly-appointed Tribune of Rome was going to be knighted. Preparations had been going on for days now. The Tribune was sparing no expenses for the banquet that would take place the following day; the hall in San Giovanni had been opened up and made into a wider space, which had then been filled with countless tables. Enormous amounts of food were being brought in, and people would be cooking all night. Already the square smelled divine. How long it had been since everyone had had a proper meal!

People that would normally ignore each other embraced in the street and made lively conversation. Children weaved among the crowd, laughing as they played. The mood of the entire city seemed to have lifted. Even Lisabetta found herself chuckling with a small group whose conversation she had been pulled into. They were taking turns guessing what kind of food would be at the banquet, each one attempting to top the last person in decadence, when a few important-looking men shouted for a space to be cleared in front of the Palace. Many people were too caught up with one another to notice, but eventually a long path was cleared. From then it was only a matter of minutes before the procession began.

Dozens of knights frolicked down the aisle, most of them nobles of various orders. Some foreigners came too, seated on magnificent prancing horses. The crowd surged forward, straining at the limits of the triumphal path in an effort to get a better view. Musicians came next, holding their heads high and blasting their instruments in a joyous tune. Lisabetta kept time with her hips, swaying from side to side as people closed in around her. The cheers grew even louder as the

Tribune's wife came into view, processing alongside her mother and fellow ladies with dignity and delight. She looked resplendent in a green gown that perfectly complimented her auburn curls. Silver trumpets sang to the sky, and more men on horses followed. And then came the Tribune.

Cola di Rienzo, the man who wanted to bring back the glory days of Rome, to elevate the city to the level of greatness it deserved. The crowd went wild. People jumped up and down and screamed and waved their arms in the air. Many of them called out to him, hoping to catch his eye. Cola looked just as happy as everybody else did, throwing his fists in the air and laughing. There was not a single speck of dirt on his white robe.

The afternoon passed in a blurred frenzy of excitement. When the sun finally began to sink below the horizon a few hours later, the Tribune ascended to the Chapel of Pope Boniface over the square and raised his hand for silence. The people complied.

"My friends," he called out in a loud voice. "I thank you all so much for coming. You know that this evening I am to be made a knight. Return tomorrow, and you will hear things which will delight God in heaven and men on earth." The crowd cheered, and Cola di Rienzo disappeared behind a group of officials.

Lisabetta shifted as the crowd began to disperse. Would she return the next day? People bade farewell to friends new and old. The group that Lisabetta had stood with tried to arrange a spot to meet at in the morning.

Would she return?

She supposed she would.

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The next morning, Lisabetta woke early and dressed quickly, eager to return to San Giovanni. Despite the hour, the streets were already bustling when she set out. The crowds became thicker the closer she got to the square, and by the time the basilica came into view, she had to push her way forward. Her group from yesterday had agreed to meet by the statue of Constantine that stood in the piazza.

As she made her way to the bronze horse, she wondered if they would be able to find each other after all. It seemed that everyone else had had the same idea; the area around the monument was packed. When she finally reached the base of the statue, though, she learned the real reason for the crowd.

Liquid was pouring from the bronze horse's nose. Not just any liquid... *wine*. She stood there gaping. Red wine cascaded down from the horse's right nostril, water from its left. The two met in a huge bowl below. All around, people were drinking from the bowl and shaking with giddy laughter. Lisabetta had never seen anything like it.



It took her two difficult trips round the statue to locate her group. They all grinned when they spotted her.

“Lisabetta!” called Nicodemo, a tall man who never seemed to leave his wife’s side. “You came.”

“Of course,” she replied with a smile. “I wouldn’t pass up a free meal.”

“Forget about food, what about wine?”

Lisabetta chuckled. “So where is de Rienzi?”

“Inside the chapel,” said Nicodemo’s wife. “Everyone is waiting for him to make an appearance.”

Just as she spoke, a cheer went up among the masses. The Tribune had emerged onto the balcony. He was dressed in a brilliant red cloak, lined with fur and bits of gold. A long sword hung belted at his waist. The newly-crowned knight raised his hand for silence, and the people obliged just as readily as they had the previous evening. He then proceeded to call on many figures who were absent, summoning them to Rome. Pope Clement was first on the list.

Lisabetta couldn’t help but agree with di Rienzo. The Pope was needed here. A number of people in the piazza murmured uneasily to one another at the mention of the Pope, however. Some even looked angry. Was it Cola’s place to address the Pope thus?

When the Tribune finished speaking, he brandished his sword in a ceremonial fashion. Most people applauded, though a few still shifted in discomfort. But doubts were forgotten once everyone realized that the time to feast had finally arrived and that they were all invited to dine. The mood became jovial once more, and the people were heading for the palace when a cry rang out above the noise.

A man was reading out as loud as he could from the scroll in his hands. It took Lisabetta a while to locate him. “His Holiness’s vicar has ordered you to stay this madness!” he called out. “Nicola de Rienzi acts without papal permission. He has no right to —”

The rest of the man’s words were drowned out. At a wave of Cola’s hand, musicians began blasting their instruments once more. People looked at each other, unsure of how to react to the vicar’s warnings. The music grew even louder, and the doors to the palace and the banquet within were flung open.

“Come on,” said Nicodemo to the group. “We want to get there before they run out of food.”

People laughed, but the sound was less genuine than before. As Lisabetta made to follow them, she stole a glance at the Tribune. He was gazing out across the piazza contentedly. Something about his expression, though, gave Lisabetta pause. It reminded her of the barons’ faces.

Her stomach growled, and she turned back to her friends. Nicodemo towered above the crowd, and she was able to elbow and shove her way over to him. The smell of decadent food

filled the air, and they gasped when they entered the hall. The space was enormous. Everyone was sitting together — rich people, poor people, young people, old people... everyone seemed happy, and in that moment, no one cared about rank. Surely a man who organized an event like this was good?

They were halfway through the meal when Lisabetta finally realized what it was she saw on the Tribune's face after the vicar's representative had spoken.

Greed.

### *Rome, 1432*

On the first day of June, 1432, the usually-bustling streets of Rome were unusually quiet. The summer sun made it unbearable to stay out for long. Most people who could stay inside, did, looking to seize any chance of respite from the unrelenting heat. Those who braved the streets, either by choice or obligation, moved lazily about. Even the most boisterous vendors marketed their goods with less enthusiasm than usual. There was perhaps just one man enjoying the weather.

Antonio di Puccio stood a hair's breadth away from his paper, scarcely daring to breathe as he sketched the statue before him. It was important to reproduce every fold in the fabric onto his page, exactly as he saw it. Di Puccio had always had the greatest respect for artists who could render cloth in sculpture. Their ability to make a marble cloak look soft and supple, or somehow make a stone veil lie transparent across a woman's face, fascinated him. He had never had much of a talent for sculpture himself. The realm of his artistry was dominated by painting. He couldn't carve a figure out of stone, but he could make them burst from a wall with a few strokes of color. It was this talent that made Antonio di Puccio one of the most sought-after painters of his time.

Equally important to him were his drawings. He sketched figures of all kinds, capturing them from a variety of angles when possible. Standing people, walking people, hanging people, kneeling people - all gave him bodies he could later use for the subjects he painted in frescoes. Individual identities did not matter; he detached himself from the story and focused on anatomy instead.

He didn't limit himself to human subjects, either. Animals, especially horses, fascinated him just as much as people did. They were needed in many of his works, so he made every effort to master the art of drawing, and then painting, them. Beyond necessity, though, di Puccio drew horses in particular simply because he loved them. Their massive shapes provided endless possibilities for sketching.

The horse that currently held his attention was made not of flesh and bone, but of bronze. Silently the metal horse snorted with impatience, baring his teeth and straining at the bit between them. The man on his back raised an arm just as his horse lifted a foreleg. He had a head of curly hair and a purposeful gaze and wore the tunic that di Puccio was now trying to replicate on paper.

“Pisanello!”

Di Puccio looked up at the sound of his nickname. A woman was walking towards him, grinning broadly. She wore a stunning red dress and matching cap, just as fine as di Puccio’s clothing, if not more so. Even in this heat, she was as beautiful as always. Not a hair on her blonde head was out of place, pulled back beneath the cap. She moved with a heavy step that seemed to contradict the finery of her dress; some people found it masculine and unrefined, but di Puccio had found it amusing all the time he’d known her. He should paint her sometime.

“Lady Malatesta,” he said, greeting her with pleasure.

“Paola to you, Magister Antonius. You know that.” He nodded respectfully and kissed her hand, but didn’t correct himself. She towered over him; but then, most people did. “How fortunate that our paths should cross again!”

Paola Malatesta was the wife of Gianfrancesco I Gonzaga, ruler of Mantua. Di Puccio had spent some years in Mantua working for the Gonzaga family, so he knew them well. The lady had aged a bit since he had last seen her; wrinkles just began to play at the corners of her face. They did nothing to diminish the loveliness of her features, however.

“Indeed, my lady,” said di Puccio. “Life has been lonelier since I left the company of your esteemed family. My memories of Mantua bring me nothing but misery, for they make me aware of how much better life could now be. I dare say you’ve ruined me. What brings you to Rome?”

“I might ask you the same question, Magister.”

“Alas, my tale is not without its share of sorrow.”

“Well, now I must hear it.”

Di Puccio ran a hand along the back of his neck, feeling the skin starting to burn; his close-cropped hair offered little protection from the sun. “Many of my skills I owe to a man named Gentile.”

“You give me too little credit, sir,” said Lady Malatesta, feigning offense. “I remember the name, and the stories, well.”

“He was a brilliant artist.”

“Was?”

“He died four years ago.”

The lady sighed. “I am sorry.”

“He died before his time had come.” Di Puccio paused. “Not without leaving a legacy, though. This church here,” he said, gesturing to the mammoth structure in the square, “is the Lateran Basilica. It’s quite old, from my understanding. In any case, Gentile was in the process of painting frescoes inside, scenes from San Giovanni’s life, when he died. Now his Holiness has asked me to complete them.”

“The Pope!” Lady Malatesta exclaimed. “My, my, Pisanello, you *are* doing well for yourself.”

“He knows I can match Gentile’s style, since I worked with him for so long. That’s all,” the painter said modestly. Pope Eugenius IV was in fact very fond of di Puccio and his work. He paid the artist a handsome sum and had recently grieved to learn of the artist’s plans to leave Rome upon completion of the frescoes; Pisanello had told him a week ago that the Duke of Milan had recruited him for his next project, and that he expected to be finished in the Lateran within the next month or so. Eugenius promised to see that the painter was well provided for before departing the city.

“And how is it coming along?”

“I am nearly done, as it happens. I hope my work will do his the justice it deserves.”

“I’m sure it will,” the Lady assured him easily. “And now look at you! Drawing in this heat.”

“I like the heat, Lady Malatesta. In truth I owe it much, for it clears the streets and gives me quiet to focus in.”

“Quiet which I have disturbed for too long, I’m sure.”

“Certainly not, my Lady. Your company is always a welcome diversion.”

She smiled gratefully and looked at his paper. “You are drawing the statue of Constantine, then?”

“You know it?”

“I have seen it before. I wonder that it hasn’t fallen, given the number of supports it seems to need.” She gestured to the small pillars that were posted along the base of the statue.

Di Puccio nodded. “An astute observation. I must be sure to include them in my drawing.”

“The purpose of which is no more than pleasure, I gather?”

“I can reuse the bodies later on in another work. I confess, though, that in this instance I simply desire a break from the church.”

“Ah. Well you are doing a fine job of it, as usual. Though I think you really ought to add those supports.”

Di Puccio laughed. “Thank you, my Lady.”

“And now I’ll say goodbye. I must be off. But it was wonderful to see you, and I wish you luck, though I’m sure you won’t need it.”

“Please give my best to Signor Gonzaga.”

“Of course.” She turned to leave.

“My lady?” di Puccio called after her before she could get far. “You never told me why you are in Rome.”

Paola Malatesta laughed. “Goodbye, Pisanello.”

## Eleven

*Rome, 1452*

The great boom would have scared many people, had many been around to hear it. But it was the middle of the night when it happened, and the piazza was empty. The sickly man wandering the streets in search of a place to sleep was too far away to hear. The grieving mother seeking solace in the church was too upset to care. The craftsman laboring by candlelight to meet his quota for the morning was too engrossed in his work to notice. The lovers caught in a warm embrace were too engrossed in each other.

When a child heard the noise and woke his parents in fright, his mother dismissed it as thunder before sending her son back to bed. But the sky was clear that night, and the stars alone witnessed the fall.

When morning arrived and the usual bustle returned to the streets, people would find the old statue of Constantine and his three-legged horse lying desolate at the foot of its marble base.

## Twelve

*Rome, 1480*

Bartolomeo Platina considered himself a rather solemn man. His life had not been free of pain; the permanent stiffness in his shoulder served as a constant reminder of his two incarcerations and the torture he had endured throughout them. His appointment as prefect of the Vatican library five years prior had been a happy occasion, but he approached his responsibilities with a seriousness that fostered relative isolation. So the look of surprise on the guards' faces as he passed was nothing compared with his own as he found himself hurrying down the halls with a bounce in his step.

His morning had at first been largely uneventful. Recently Platina had taken it upon himself to revisit parts of the library's collection that had lain undisturbed for a time, for pleasure but also for the purpose of creating inventories. A few hours ago, he'd decided to tackle the immense number of old coins that sat gathering dust. He slowed when he reached those from the Roman Empire; he loved comparing the emperors of old to the men that more recently occupied the papal throne.

The prefect was nearly at the end of the era when he came across a gold coin that struck him in particular. He paused. On the coin was a horse and rider that looked strangely familiar. The writing on it identified the man as the emperor Marcus Aurelius, but he and his horse, small as they were, bore an uncanny resemblance to the equestrian statue that now stood outside the Lateran. The bronze horse with the rider that everyone believed to be Constantine.

Platina's breath caught in his throat as he set the coin carefully aside and rifled through the pieces he'd already gone through. There was one in particular he was looking for. It was just... there. He held up a coin depicting the head, in profile, of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. The prefect recognized that curly hair and beard.

Looking at the two coins together gave Platina an idea. And he knew someone who would want to hear anything that had to do with that statue.



The knock on the door came just as Sixtus reached a key passage in his book. He considered ignoring the intruder but remembered himself just in time. "Yes, come in!" he called, folding the book in his lap and assuming a pose of quiet contemplation. The Pope brightened as a tall man with a cap of dark hair walked through the door. He wore red robes that dragged at his feet.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, your Holiness," the scholar began.

“Well you’re here now,” Sixtus replied, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. “How are things in the library?”

“Excellent, your Holiness.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” The Pope paused for a moment, considering the man before him. “You’ve done great work, Platina. I made the right decision when I put you in charge.”

“Thank you, your Holiness. In fact I have come to speak to you about a matter of the library.”

“I guessed as much. What is it?”

“I was looking through the coin collection this morning —”

“Interesting. For what purpose?”

“I have been taking inventories of the library collection, your Holiness.”

“Very well. Go on.”

“I came across two coins of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Here, I brought them to show you.” Platina produced a cloth bundle from his robes and handed it over. Sixtus unfolded it and held up the two gold coins inside. “I looked at them for a long time. That horse and rider pair look a lot like the equestrian statue outside the Lateran, do they not? And that portrait, it looks like the bronze man’s head.”

The Pope looked up. “The statue of Constantine?” That statue was important to Sixtus. Six years ago, he had commissioned restoration work on it and had it mounted on a new stone pedestal. He felt it deserved a foundation as magnificent as itself. Relics of ancient Rome were very valuable to him.

“That’s just it, your Holiness. I wonder if it has been misidentified.”

“Misidentified...” He ran his fingers over the face of the coin in his hand, considering. “You think the rider is this emperor?”

“It seems a reasonable guess to make. There is a column of Marcus Aurelius in the —”

“I know the column.”

Platina bowed his head apologetically. “Then you will recall the bands of war reliefs that cover it. Perhaps this statue is another commemoration of those wars.”

“Pity we no longer have the original inscription,” said the Pope in response, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He paused for a few moments, considering. “I would like to look at the statue again.”

“Very good, your Holiness.”

“Shall we walk together?”

“Now, your Holiness?” Platina couldn’t quite hide his surprise.

“Unless the time is inconvenient for you.”

“Not at all.”



“Very good. I’ll only need a moment.” Sixtus nodded to one of the three guards standing behind the library prefect, and the guard left the suite. After folding the coins back into the cloth, the Pope crossed the room and returned his book to the shelf. “Now then,” he said when he reached Platina’s side. “Tell me what else you’ve been examining lately.”

The two men made their way down to the base of the palace, pausing their conversation only to climb into the carriage that the guard had already called for.



One of the guards that had accompanied the carriage opened the door when they reached the Lateran square. Platina waited for the Pope to step down before following. Sixtus was a large, rather round man, but he remained surprisingly active. The scholar was glad that his master was intrigued by the identity of the statue and thanked God once more that Rome’s newest pope cared about this sort of thing.

Flanked by guards, they approached the giant bronze monument and halted at its base, staring at the inscription that told of Sixtus’s restoration of the ancient, collapsing bronze horse. The new pedestal was beautiful, a block of solid marble with a band of sculpture carved along the top. There were supports for the horse and rider and bits of pillars surrounding the monument.

A story played at the corners of Platina’s mind, something he had come across some time ago and recorded in the book he wrote on the lives of the popes. A man was hung from this statue once, wasn’t he? Hung by his *hair* in fact, the library prefect recalled, massaging his shoulder absentmindedly and suppressing a shudder. That was not a detail he’d soon forget.

“Well then,” Sixtus began, summoning the scholar back to the present. “Let’s take another look at this coin of yours.”

The two took turns examining the coin and looking back and forth between it and the statue. Platina felt increasingly confident in his re-identification and glanced at Sixtus. To the his pleasure, the Pope’s eyes were wide.

“What do you think, your Holiness?” Platina prompted.

“I suppose you could be right, Bartolomeo. The evidence is plain. But if this is indeed Marcus Aurelius, why did people begin calling him Constantine?”

Platina shook his head. He wasn’t even sure where he had first heard the statue identified as Constantine. He just knew that it had always been referred to as such. “Perhaps the original inscription was destroyed?”

“Perhaps.” The Pope looked equally pensive. “I want you to do some more research on this, Platina. Find out how common these bronzes would have been. See if you can find any other portraits of Aurelius.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.” The two stood staring at the statue for a few minutes more before Sixtus spoke again. “Come, let us return.”

Platina waited for the Pope to climb back into the carriage before stepping up himself. It seemed his inventories would have to wait.

## Thirteen

*Rome, 1538*

A roar shook the crowd, and hundreds of people surged forward in a desperate attempt to see the moving statue. No one cared that they could see their breath in the freezing air. No one cared that they were packed tightly among people they'd never met. The Marcus Aurelius statue was being moved from its home at the Lateran, and though not everyone knew why, they all had the feeling that something big was happening.

It hadn't been easy for Celia Antognini to get permission to join the festivities. "It's a historic event!" she had argued.

"Giovanni wants to take you?" her mother asked, sounding surprised.

Celia's heart sunk. Her betrothed was not usually one for crowds... or people in general, if one were to ask her. "I was going to go with Giorgio and Bene," she replied. Surely her two older brothers were chaperones enough? Not that she needed a chaperone. She was sixteen years old, for goodness' sake.

"Benedetto is working."

"No one is working today, Mamma. Everyone is going to watch the statue being moved!"

"Don't be dramatic, Celia. If you want to go, ask Giovanni to take you."

"But Bene and Giorgio already promised to go with me. They should be here any moment."

"Who's coming any moment?" Signor Antognini echoed, walking into the room with a bundle of papers in his hand.

"Bene and Giorgio, Papà."

"Mm, that's nice..." Her father sunk into a chair at the table and ran a hand through his grey hair, looking down at the papers.

"They're coming to take her to the Capitolino," said her mother, with an edge to her voice. Her husband said nothing. "Patrizio, are you listening?"

"What's that?"

"Your daughter wants to go to the Capitolino to see the statue being moved."

"What statue?"

"The emperor outside the Lateran. The one with the horse."

"It's being moved? Whatever for?"

Celia jumped in. "The Pope has ordered it."

Her father looked back at his papers and smiled knowingly. "Yes, I bet he has."

"What does that mean?"

"Powerful men like powerful things," was his reply. "And Paul is getting old."

Signora Antognini opened her mouth to respond when her two sons came crashing into the room. Benedetto was the eldest of the two, but both of the brothers were enormous. They shared a strong build and had the same dark curls as their sister.

“Hello Mamma!” said Giorgio, lifting Signora Antognini off the ground as he hugged her. She shrieked and demanded to be put back down at once, but Giorgio only laughed. Benedetto was reading the papers on the table over his father’s shoulder. He looked grim, but only for a moment.

“We’ve come to kidnap Celia for the day,” he announced to the room.

“Certainly not,” said his mother, standing once more and smoothing her dress. “You have work. And take your lazy lump of a brother with you, while you’re at it.”

“Relax, Mamma,” said Giorgio, clutching her by the shoulders. “Breathe.”

She batted his hands away and placed hers on her hips. “What about Giovanni?”

Both brothers groaned. “Not a chance. He’s boring,” Benedetto replied. Celia smacked his arm but did not dispute the fact.

“He is your sister’s betrothed,” their mother retorted.

“He’s boring,” Benedetto repeated.

“Patrizio, do something.”

Her husband looked up, a disinterested look on his face. “Do what, dear?”

“Demand that they take Giovanni with them, at least.”

He returned to his papers. “Enjoy yourselves, children.”

The kids moved immediately. Benedetto patted his father on the shoulder and kissed his mother on the cheek before she could explode into a fresh wave of protests. Giorgio grabbed Celia’s hand and pulled her in front of him.

“Thank you Papà!” Celia called as she was thrust through the door. Benedetto followed them out, and they were gone.

“I can’t see a thing!” Celia complained as the crowd erupted into cheers. She and her brothers were standing on the path that wound from the Forum Romanum, up the hill and to the square where the statue would make its new home — a prime spot for the day’s event, if she hadn’t been so short.

“What?” Giorgio yelled.

“I said I can’t see a thing!” The noise was deafening. What was so exciting? Was the statue coming?

“I can’t either.”

“We’ll give you a boost,” Benedetto shouted to Celia. Each brother bent down, bumping into the people around them, and grabbed one of her legs. She didn’t care that she looked and felt

undignified as she was hoisted into the air. Her mother would have been horrified, and the thought made her smile.

“What can you see?” Giorgio called from below.

The sight took Celia’s breath away. She had never seen so many people. Hundreds of them - or was it thousands? - filled the streets, a sea of colors beneath the greying sky. There was movement far in the distance, and it looked like the masses were parting. Squinting, Celia could just make out the group processing down the cleared aisle. They surrounded something huge that moved very slowly and could only have been the statue. People filled in the passage the instant it was no longer needed and joined the parade.

“The statue is coming!” she shouted.

It took a long time to move the massive statue. The temperature outside continued to drop, and Celia hugged her sides, chilly in spite of the people crammed in on all sides. Still, the general atmosphere remained a happy one. The noise died down once the people around her realized it was going to take a while for the statue to reach them, so conversations became possible once more. She and her brothers passed the time talking and laughing and trying not to freeze, though her mood darkened when the subject of Giovanni came up. Her brothers noticed and attempted to cheer her up.

“He is a respectable man,” Benedetto offered. “And he likes you a lot.”

“I’m sure he’ll become less of a drag after a few months with you,” added Giorgio.

Celia wasn’t much comforted. She was dreading her impending marriage more and more these days. She didn’t hate Giovanni - he was nice to her, he had a steady source of income, he was decent looking. But he was so reserved that he often felt like a stranger. He practically *was* a stranger. Would things be better once they were married? There was no way to know.

Once they had exhausted the topic of her marriage, Celia’s brothers lifted her again so that she could report the procession’s progress.

“It’s passing the Campo Vaccino!” Celia exclaimed excitedly, giving the common name for the Forum Romanum. “It looks like they’ve got it in two parts.” The bronze horse was secured onto a wooden platform. A team of horses pulled it along, while men pushed from behind. The emperor had been removed from the horse’s back and rode a separate wooden construction.

The surrounding people heard and brightened at the news. “It’s almost here!” someone cried. Word spread to those farther back, and excitement pulsed throughout the group. The anticipation was almost tangible.

Pretty soon, men could be heard shouting for people to make way. Someone divided the crowd, and people crammed back into their sides. Celia had thought it was tight before, but now she could scarcely breathe.

“Make way!” the men continued to yell.

“Go away,” she grumbled uncomfortably.

There was nowhere else to move, yet somehow people continued to do so, widening the path that the statue would take. When it was clear at last, people began to cheer once more. This time Celia and her brothers joined in. The statue had arrived.

The bronze figures were huge. Celia could see the entire top half of the rider over the heads of the people in front of her. His curly hair reminded her of her brothers’. With his right hand extended, it was as if the emperor knew he was leading a procession. His horse too, with his mouth open and foreleg raised, seemed as aware of the parade as his rider. The statue’s progress had become even slower, now that it had reached the hill, but no one minded. Nobody was in a rush to go home, or to work.

When the statue had finally passed, Celia and her brothers surged forward with the rest of the crowd to fill the space behind it. They made the slow walk up the hill and called out joyfully when they crested it at last.

The procession came to a halt, and Benedetto and Giorgio gave Celia a quick boost up once more.

“Can you see the new pedestal?” Benedetto asked. The statue had left its previous pedestal behind and was to sit on a new one in the center of the square.

Celia shook her head. “There are too many people. I can see the horse though... they’re preparing to move it!”

Gradually, the statue was shifted onto its new base. Pulleys were used to lift both horse and rider. Celia knew when the emperor had been reseated onto his mount, because the noise became deafening once more.

“Welcome home!” the people chanted to the statue. “Welcome home!”

## Fourteen

*Rome, 1545*

The artist surveyed the scene before him and grimaced. There was much to be done, things that should have been started long ago when the Marcus Aurelius statue had been moved. But other projects had distracted the Pope from the redesigning of the Campidoglio, and the work the artist had planned years ago had only recently begun. He looked up at the equestrian statue towering above. At least one part of his plan had been implemented. His design for the new piazza placed the statue at the center of everything. It was the heart of the hill.

The statue had been in deplorable condition when the artist first encountered it. The Pope had wanted it moved, and he agreed, but the effort to relocate it would have come to nothing if the statue had fallen apart on the journey over. The horse's neck and left side were cracked, and a few pieces of the bronze shell were missing, as if the statue had suffered an attack or fallen over at some point. The bronze had needed to be replaced, and the pillars beneath the emperor's feet, removed. The artist had plans for an improved base as well, but that part of his restoration had yet to be carried out.

He detected movement out of the corner of his eye. A worker was hurrying over. "What is it?" he demanded, a bit too harshly.

"Sorry, Signor Buonarroti. You are needed over by the marble."

"The marble," the artist repeated, his voice dripping with disdain. There were at least five piles of the stone scattered across the hilltop.

"Sorry, Signor. Over there." The worker pointed.

"Thank you, Fiorelli. You are most helpful. I will be there shortly."

Fiorelli seemed to wither slightly under the artist's gaze, but he did not leave. "I'm sorry, Signor, it is rather pressing."

"Tell me something, Fiorelli. How old are you?"

"I... twenty-six, Signor."

"Good. When you get to be my age, then you can dictate the speed at which you ought to walk."

"Michelangelo!" another man called. Lucio, his overseer. "Quit gossiping and get over here."

Fiorelli flinched, but Michelangelo just snorted and made his way over to the center of commotion. Having worked with Michelangelo for many years, Lucio was one of the few people who could speak to him that way.

"The stone isn't cutting properly," the overseer explained as Michelangelo approached.

Michelangelo studied the man before him. He had a good build and strong stance, but wrinkles played at the corners of his eyes and lips, showing the cracks in his youth. When had they all gotten so old?

“Michelangelo.”

The artist took one look at the marble and rolled his eyes. “It won’t cut properly because it is a terrible piece of stone.”

“What? I thought you picked it yourself.” Lucio did not question how Michelangelo could tell the value of a marble slab with a glance.

“You think I would pick something that wouldn’t cut properly?”

One of the workers raised his hand sheepishly. “Franco picked it, Signor.”

“Franco!” exclaimed Lucio. “He’s an idiot. Why did we send him to the quarry?”

“I will have to go myself,” said Michelangelo. “Tomorrow, I suppose. In the meantime, get rid of this rubbish.”

“We don’t save any of it, Signor?” one of the men asked.

“I will not have defective marble in anything with my name attached to it. By all means, take some yourself if you like.” He looked back at the sound of a cart rolling up the hill. Stacks of wood were piled high in the back. “There. Work on the scaffolding for the rest of today.”

The men voiced their assent and began discussing where to dispose of the marble. Lucio followed Michelangelo away from the group.

“It will get done,” the overseer assured him.

“I should hope so,” Michelangelo replied. “It shouldn’t be difficult to get rid of some stone.”

“I meant the Campidoglio.”

The artist said nothing.

“They’re good men, and we have the funds now.”

“Don’t you have more important things to be doing than comforting a man who needs no comfort?”

Lucio gave a half-smile and looked out at the piazza. “At least the ground has been leveled. The piazza will look masterful when it’s completed. And the statue makes an excellent center piece.”

“You’re still doing it, Lucio.”

“Very well. Will you stay the rest of the day?”

Michelangelo shook his head. “I am to meet the Pope this afternoon.”

“Ah, yes. I forgot. His Holiness is doing well, then?”

“I guess I’ll soon find out.”

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The halls of the Vatican were not as easy to navigate as they had once been, and the walk to the papal apartments was a slow one. Decades of laboring with heavy tools and materials had made Michelangelo incredibly strong, but even though seventy years had done nothing to dull his wits, lately his bones ached more than he cared to admit.

There was a time when Paul would have asked to see the construction on the Capitoline for himself, but now he did not venture from the palace often. So Michelangelo had come to report the progress himself. When he reached the room he was looking for, the guard at the door announced his presence within. The artist heard a throaty laugh, followed by the Pope's request for him to come inside. The guard let him past.

"Michelangelo! My dear fellow," Paul rasped. "My word, you look awful."

Michelangelo crossed the room and clasped the Pope's wrinkled hands warmly in his own. "We have become old men, Your Holiness."

"I'm afraid you may be right. Please, sit." He gestured to the trio of upholstered chairs gathered by the fireplace.

The artist nodded his gratitude and sunk into one of the seats. The Pope did the same.

"Now, tell me how things are with you."

"Oh, I'm not of much interest," Michelangelo replied. "Things in Rome carry on as usual while I live, just as they will when I'm gone."

The Pope smiled. "The world has a funny way of reminding us just how small we are in the grand scheme of things."

"You have done great things, Your Holiness. Your name will live on."

"I hope that it will. Just as I pray I won't live to see the day when the world is without its Michelangelo. But what of the Capitolino?"

Michelangelo rubbed his hands together and sighed. "Things are much the same as they were in my last report. The project moves slower than I would like."

"Indeed. Do you have all the materials you require?"

"We will very soon, I hope. As it happens, I'm going to the quarry tomorrow."

The Pope nodded. "What of the workers? I forget the name of your overseer."

"Lucio, Your Holiness. He is a good man and knows what he's doing; I trust him to manage the site. The workers are competent and strong, for the most part. Some changes might have to be made."

"Do what you have to do. I don't want the project to suffer on account of ineptitude."

"Nor do I. Don't be concerned, I will make sure it doesn't."

The Pope sat back in his chair, looking pleased. "We are doing good work, my friend, are we not?"

Michelangelo shook his head. “You are doing good work, Your Lordship. I am simply helping you do it.”

He was being respectfully modest, but he knew the Campidoglio would be magnificent when it was completed. The new design was a vast improvement upon the current state of the hill, and now that the Pope’s energies were fully focused on this project, it could finally move forward.

Michelangelo just hoped he would live long enough to see it done.

Fifteen

Rome, 1879

“Slow down! Heavens, Georgie, I am sure you’re trying to kill me.” The girl struggled to keep up with her companion, who seemed not in the least deterred by the climb.

Georgiana looked over her shoulder. “Oh honestly, Anne. It’s just a hill.”

“I thought vacation was supposed to be relaxing,” Anne protested.

“If you would rather spend the day sitting with a book, why bother leaving England at all?”

“An Italian parlor is still exotic. You saw for yourself the furniture this morning. I have never felt softer cushions in my entire life.” The words came slowly as Anne struggled to get her laboring breaths under control. “Besides, you did beg me so.”

It’s a shame I did, for I didn’t realize you would be such a huge bore, thought Georgiana. “Come on,” she said aloud. “We’re nearly at the top.”

The two fifteen-year-old girls crested the hill and paused in wonder. They were standing at the edge of a grand piazza, bordered on three sides by palatial-looking buildings. The one directly opposite them was the tallest and stood out with its balcony, slopping staircases to either side, and sprawling fountain in front. A few people were walking about, speaking eagerly in groups of two and three. In the center of the piazza was a pedestal topped with an enormous statue of a horse and rider.

“It’s magnificent!” exclaimed Georgiana. “I told you it would be worth it.”

Even Anne could not help feeling a little excitement. “Should we wait for your mother and father?” she asked politely.

“We couldn’t possibly!” said Georgiana with conviction. “If they want to dally, let them. *We* should explore.”

The girls headed straight to the center of the piazza. “Have you ever seen such a thing?” Georgiana asked breathlessly, staring up at the equestrian statue. There was a small barrier separating them from the base of the monument.

“Only in books,” Anne replied. “The horse reminds me a bit of your brother’s.”

“Philip?” Georgiana giggled. “He isn’t nearly so regal.”

They circled the massive statue. “I wonder why some parts look darker than others,” Anne wondered aloud.

“It has been restored,” came a voice from somewhere behind them.

Both girls swiveled round. An older gentleman stood there, gazing at them kindly.

“Restored?” asked Anne.

“That’s right,” replied the stranger, and the girls were relieved to hear his English accent. “This statue is old— very old. From the Roman Empire in fact. Parts of it have been replaced; I imagine it was damaged at some point.”

A woman walked over to where they stood. Her clothes were respectable, but it was the way she carried herself that gave her an air of elegance. “I’ve got the tickets, Charles,” she said, glancing between the man and the two young girls. “Have we made new friends?”

“I’m afraid we haven’t yet been introduced. My name is Charles Hurst,” said the gentleman to the girls. “This is my wife, Eliza.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Anne replied respectfully. “I’m Anne Fletcher, and this is my cousin Georgiana Blackburn.”

“I was just telling them about this statue’s restorations,” said Mr. Hurst to his wife.

“Splendid, isn’t it?” Mrs. Hurst asked the girls, smiling broadly.

“Oh, yes,” they replied enthusiastically.

“This was the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Have you heard of him?” Both girls shook their heads. “He was a rather philosophical man. I read his *Meditations* recently and enjoyed it immensely.”

“My wife and I have been to Rome twice before, you see,” Mr. Hurst added.

Georgiana felt a little intimidated by the culture of these people. “This is our first time here,” she admitted.

“When did you arrive?”

“Just yesterday.”

“Ah. So I take it you haven’t yet seen much of the city?”

“Hardly any at all,” said Anne. “We were going to try the Forum today.”

“Oh, that’s just over this hill!” Mrs. Hurst exclaimed cheerfully.

“Yes, we were using a map,” said Georgiana, a little defensively. “We’ve only just climbed the hill.”

“Well, while you’re here, you really should look inside the museum.” Mrs. Hurst gestured behind her. “There are some wonderful pieces of art inside.”

“Do you have any other recommendations?” asked Anne rather eagerly. Georgiana glanced at her cousin.

The couple looked thoughtful. “There’s the Colosseum, of course,” said Mr. Hurst. “And the Pantheon. You cannot visit Rome without seeing those.”

“And the Spanish Steps,” his wife interjected. “You’ll have to visit them too.”

“That’s lucky, those were already on our itinerary!” Georgiana said with a smile, holding herself a little taller.

Anne tugged at her cousin’s sleeve. “Let’s go inside the museum.”

“I think we’d better wait for my parents,” her cousin replied solemnly. “If they arrive and we’ve gone inside, they won’t know where we are.”

“Are they here?” Mrs. Hurst inquired.

“They’re coming. We left them at the bottom of the hill.”

Mr. Hurst stuck out his hand. “Well, Miss Fletcher, Miss Blackburn. It was very nice to meet you both. I hope you have a lovely visit.”

Georgiana took the extended hand lightly. “Yes, thank you so much.”

Anne shook Ms. Hurst’s hand with more force. “Enjoy your stay.”

The older couple walked away.

“What lovely people!” Anne exclaimed, turning to Georgiana.

“They were all right,” her cousin allowed.

“You didn’t like them?”

“No, I did. They were very...”

“Cultured?” Anne offered.

“Knowledgeable.”

“Well I should hope so. They’ve been here before. Oh, I wish we didn’t have to wait for your parents! What do you suppose is taking them so long?”

“You weren’t so eager to explore before,” Georgiana observed, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes, well, that climb woke me up.”

“I see.”

“Now I feel as if I can hardly stand still!”

Georgiana began to catch some of Anne’s enthusiasm and grinned a little in spite of herself. “Well, I suppose we could get the tickets to the museum and then come back.”

There was no argument from Anne, so the two girls headed over in the direction the Hursts had gone in.

“Oh look, souvenirs!” chirped Anne as they joined the ticket line. A stand was set up a few feet away, overflowing with little trinkets. Once they had purchased their tickets, the girls walked over to the display. Anne fingered some miniature statues, while Georgiana leafed through the bundle of postcards. Immediately she stumbled across one with a photograph of the equestrian statue in the piazza. What was the emperor’s name — Marius?

“Coming, Georgie?” Anne was already making her purchase.

After a brief hesitation, Georgiana grabbed the postcard and pulled out her money. She would send it to her mother. Or maybe she would simply keep it.

Sixteen

Rome, 1943

16 October

There is a yearning deep within, a longing for the past that troubles my heart. I see it when I glimpse the furrowed brows of the German soldiers that now occupy Roman streets. I hear it in the whispers of trouble ahead that float around the ghetto like leaves in the wind. I feel it in the mornings, when I can no longer wrap myself in the blanket of night and pretend I am not afraid.

Simone put down his pen as the first drops of rain began to fall. The piazza was empty in the first light of dawn. He supposed he should have been in bed like everyone else at this hour, but ever since those Jews had been arrested on Yom Kippur a few days prior, sleep had been hard to come by.

The Jewish community said there was nothing to fear. "Those people were special cases," they assured one another. "They're not after us." Simone hoped they were right.

He didn't think they were.

Though the rain was only a drizzle, Simone dropped his notebook into his satchel and stood, arching his back in a deep stretch. He liked coming here. In the quiet of the early morning, the Campidoglio was one of the few places where he found peace. Though people flooded the hill throughout the course of the day, for now he could be alone. Absently, he stared at the place where an equestrian statue used to stand in the center of the piazza. Simone had been there three years ago when the statue was moved, sitting to the side with a notebook in hand much like he sat now. It had to go for its protection, the workers had said. There was a war on, you know. Simone did know. He had watched as they lifted the rider off of his horse and onto a wooden construction and wheeled him away on his new throne. The horse had come next, the bronze straining against the pulleys' grip as it was hoisted from its pedestal.

Simone had spent the afternoon sketching the proceedings, and in doing so had earned some attention from the workers. Every once in a while, a couple of them would come over and ask to see his pictures. One man even tried to buy one of his drawings off of him. Simone gave it to him for free.

The rain brought him back to the present as it started to pick up. Slinging the satchel across his shoulders, he headed down the ramp-like stairs and made for home.

The walk to the ghetto was a short one. Though he passed a few people here and there, the streets were relatively quiet. It wasn't until he neared the river that he realized something was wrong.

There were voices. Too loud, and too many for this time of day. Simone quickened his pace. The buildings became increasingly dilapidated as he navigated the narrow streets, searching for the source of commotion. He rounded the corner and stopped dead.

The street was full of people. Not just a few on their way to work - *everyone*. It was as if the buildings had been evacuated. What was going on? It took him a moment to notice further details. Many people were dressed in pajamas. Almost everyone was carrying something. And then there were the men in uniform.

Germans. With guns. They moved in and out of the crowd, barking commands and pushing people into place. Simone had a single thought: his family.

He turned on his heel and sprinted in the direction he had come from, heading left, then right, then left again. Everywhere he turned there were people in the streets. After a while he slowed his pace to glance behind him and almost immediately collided with something, hard. He hit the ground and heard the other person do the same.

“Mi dispiace. Sorry, sorry,” Simone groaned, rolling over to see the woman he had barreled into lying on the cobblestones. He knew her. It was Maria, the woman who made the hats. Soaked from the wet ground, he picked himself up and pulled her to her feet, apologizing once more.

Her eyes widened when she recognized him. “Simone! Vada via! Vada Via!” *Get out!*

“What’s going on?” he demanded, grabbing her by the arms.

“Vada via!” she repeated.

He heard a shout nearby and saw a soldier coming towards him.

“Via!” cried Maria.

So Simone ran.

But not out of the ghetto. A minute later he was back on Via della Reginella, his street. This one wasn’t as crowded, but he guessed it wouldn’t stay that way for long. He tore down the road and into the building where his family lived, taking the stairs two at a time. The panic was immediately palpable when he burst through the door to their flat.

“Simone!” cried his mother when she saw him. Simone ran to her, but after a brief embrace she pushed him away. “I thought you’d escaped! Why are you here?”

“I was at the Campidoglio. What’s going on? Why are there Germans outside?”

“They’ve come for us.” Her voice trembled. “They’re taking us away.”

“To where?”

His mother looked just as lost as he felt.

The banging on the door made both of them jump. Simone went to answer it before his mother could.

A single German man barged past him into the room, brandishing his gun and a piece of paper. “Algardi?” he asked. Their last name. Simone said nothing. “Pack your things,” the soldier commanded in broken Italian. “Twenty minutes. Move!”

Simone didn’t hesitate. “Mamma!” he called, walking into the next room. His two younger sisters were bent over a suitcase each, frantically trying to cram in as many items as possible. It looked like they had already started packing before the German man had arrived. His mother appeared with another bag and dumped it at Simone’s feet.

“Hurry,” she said.

Simone went to his room and paused in the doorway. How do you pack your life into a bag at all, let alone in twenty minutes?

Fighting his sense of urgency with the need to be practical, he decided to start with clothes. When he had stuffed many of them in the bag, he grabbed his toothbrush and toothpaste. A bar of soap. The book he was reading. A pair of shoes. His watch. And... the bag was full. He still had the satchel slung over his shoulder and left it there. What about food? Would they need that?

Simone raced into the kitchen and threw open the cabinets. There wasn’t much there, but he managed to find a few things: two apples, a loaf of bread, a jar of jam. He carried them into the room where his mother and sisters were.

“Do any of you have room for these?” he asked. His mother crossed the room and snatched them from his hands, stuffing them into her bag. One of his sisters left and reappeared moments later with her pillow.

“A pillow!” Simone exclaimed. “How are you going to carry that?” No one answered him. The soldier yelled something from the other room. “Come on,” he said, taking his bag and leading them all out into the foyer where the German man waited. As soon as he saw them he yanked open the door.

“Wait!” said one of his sisters. “What about an umbrella? It’s raining.”

The soldier shepherded them all out of the flat and down the stairs at the end of the hall.

Most of their neighbors were already in the street when they got outside. People huddled together and chatted anxiously, trying to guess what was going to happen and doing their best to ignore the rain soaking them through. Many carried pots and other valuables. Simone spoke to no one, just stood with his arms around his sisters and watched the road, the soldiers, his mother.

A few minutes later, the Germans began to shout things at the Jews. One of them approached Simone and said something in a language he couldn’t understand.

“I don’t speak German!” Simone exclaimed.

The soldier shoved Simone with the butt of his gun and pointed down the road, yelling something. Simone took his family and began to walk in the direction the soldier had indicated.

Other people followed suit, and the line of Jews processed down the narrow street, flanked by Germans with guns.

They halted when they reached the Portico d'Ottavia. Others were already there, but they had to wait for still more to come. The rain continued to fall in a steady stream. Looking around, Simone realized that there weren't many other men among the masses. Most of the people there were women, children, and elderly people. He wasn't sure what to make of that.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the soldiers crammed the Jews into black-canvas trucks. Having a roof over their heads ought to have provided some relief, but the air inside the truck was hot and thick, and it wasn't long before people began wishing for the coolness of the rain outside. No one spoke as the driver revved the engine and pulled away from the ghetto.

They stopped at the Collegio Militare on the river, where people were herded out of the trucks and into the building. Simone's mother led the family inside, struggling to hold up her overpacked bag. After waiting for instructions that never came, the four of them pushed their way over to a spot near the corner, claiming the bench that sat against the wall. Simone gave the chair to his mother and sisters and sat instead on one of the damp suitcases, trying not to give in to terror. The lack of space didn't bother him as much as it perhaps ought to have; he was used to overcrowded areas. But why were there so many people here? There had to be hundreds. The German that had come to their flat had carried a list of names. What put a person on that list? There were too many questions and no answers to any of them.

They stayed in the Collegio the rest of that day and the next. A bucket of water was passed around every once in a while. No food was given. Simone's family did their best to preserve what little food they brought, but hunger is relentless in its persistence, and between the four of them it was gone before the end of the second day.

People talked with one another to pass the time and keep from panicking. Many spoke of the Pope, wondering if he was going to save them. He would do something, wouldn't he? Surely he couldn't ignore the people being torn from their homes right outside his doorstep. Simone didn't join the conversations. He wrote in his journal, sketched a little, read a little. He and his sisters played a word game at one point. Anything to keep themselves occupied.

When the sun rose after their second night in the Collegio, the Germans returned. As soon as people got to their feet and assembled their belongings, they were herded into the black trucks once again. Everyone's limbs were stiff and sore from two days in the building, and the walk was a slow one. People still whispered of the Pope as they climbed into the trucks and were pulled away. When they disembarked a while later alongside a freight train, the whispers stopped.

The Germans began splitting the crowd into groups. People panicked as they were separated from their loved ones, crying and screaming and reaching out in vain.

“Stay together!” Simone’s mother commanded to her children. The family struggled to hold hands and carry their bags at the same time.

When the soldiers reached their part of the crowd, the four of them clung to one another and moved as one to one of the groups. The door to the train car nearest them was slid open, and the group was shoved inside.

Simone’s family was one of the first into the car. His mother headed directly for one of the corners, and her children followed. More and more people kept pouring onto the train, some becoming aggressive as they tried to carve out spaces for themselves. Simone shut his eyes and tried to remember where he was before this began: in the Campidoglio at dawn, writing and breathing and remembering that day when the equestrian statue was moved. How had he gotten here?

The door slammed shut, and he opened his eyes. The wood groaned and the wheels screeched against the tracks as the train pulled out of the station.

Seventeen

Rome, 1987

Mariella was woken by the sunlight streaming in through the open window. Her bed sheets lay crumpled at her feet, having been cast off sometime in the night. The little fan chugging away nearby did nothing to dispel the suffocating heat.

The young woman rolled over onto the damp pillow, disappointed that she had woken in the middle of such a nice dream. There was a boat, and water, and —

Wait, what time was it?

Mariella opened her eyes to look at the clock.

And immediately leapt out of bed.

She crossed the room in three quick strides, groaning as she threw open her closet and pushed aside hanger after hanger. Where the hell was the green top?

Another glance at the clock. 8:45. *Merda.*

Forget the shirt. She reached for another outfit instead and ran to the bathroom after changing. The reflection in the mirror was less than appealing. She pulled her long hair back into a ponytail, gurgled tap water, and grabbed her thick-rimmed glasses. Another mirror check. Well, no time to fix it now.

Mariella grabbed her bag, slipped into her shoes and left the flat.

The bus rounded the corner just as she opened the gate at the front of her building. Leaving the gate to slam behind her, she took off as fast as her legs would allow. The bus was at the stop. No, she *couldn't* miss this one. Who knew when the next one would come, and she was late enough as it was. She pushed herself onward, her bag adding an awkward load, but was still fifty paces away when the bus pulled back into the flow of traffic.

Mariella screeched as she slowed to a walk, tacking on a string of curses that made the surrounding people stare.

“What?” she demanded, tossing her arms in the air. Sometimes it seemed like she was the only person in Rome who cared about being on time. They looked away. The thick air made it difficult to breathe, and she just stood there gasping as she tried to figure out an alternative route she could take. There wasn't one. This was the most direct way of getting to the Istituto. She supposed she could hail a cab, but there were none in sight.

She had never been late to work. Not one day. Not ever. Punctuality was something she prided herself on, even though her family and friends made fun of her for it. At the University of Bologna she had only missed three classes in her five years of study, and those had been because of illness. Now she was four months into the student program at the Istituto Centrale del

Restauro, working under none other than Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro for God's sake, and here she was heaving her lungs out at a bus stop. She should have been there half an hour ago. Why hadn't her alarm gone off?

Mariella looked up and nearly cried with relief. By some strange miracle, her bus was pulling up to the stop. She hurried over to the curb and launched herself inside as soon as the doors opened. People crammed in behind, boxing her in as usual. The smell of sweat and summer bodies was overwhelming, and the minutes crawled by as they made their way across the city. She wasn't sure how she looked, but she felt thoroughly disgusting by the time the bus arrived at her stop.

Mariella shoved her way out of the bus and hurried over to the building looming ahead. The Istituto. What would her boss say? Should she make up a better excuse? What if she became known as the group slacker? A million thoughts competed in her mind as she yanked open the door and walked inside.

The blast of cold air that hit her felt like heaven. She pulled off her glasses and ran a sleeve over her face, trying to wipe some of the grime away. When she reached her locker, she immediately pulled out the white coat, grateful to reclaim some kind of normalcy. The hall was empty; everyone else was already inside. She checked her watch. 9:36.

A few people looked up as Mariella entered the lab, but she avoided their gazes and circled the room until she found her boss.

"Alessandra, I am *so* sorry I'm late."

The woman didn't take her eyes off of the bronze in front of her. "Ah, Mariella. I was beginning to wonder if you were dead."

Mariella shook her head. "I must have slept through my alarm. I'm so sorry, it won't happen again."

Alessandra gave the girl a once-over before speaking again. "Yes, well, as you were." She sounded almost amused as she waved the girl away.

Mariella nodded and went to her station, head down. That was it? A thousand different scenarios had gone through her head on the bus ride over, and most of them had ended in her being penalized in some way: yelled at, payment docked, sent home for the day, fired. Her shoulders sagged with relief as she reached her spot and looked up at the statue before her.

The bronze horse from the Marcus Aurelius monument that had stood in the center of the Campidoglio for so long now towered over her in the lab. Its rider was in another part of the Istituto, though he would be reaffixed to the horse's back following the restoration. Eight years ago, some idiot had set off a bomb by the Senator's Palace on the hill, and a team had been sent to check the statue for damages. It survived the bomb attack just fine, but the examination made people aware of just how damaged the bronze had become over time. Centuries of exposure to

the bustling city had left the horse and rider in dire need of restoration. A few pictures scattered around the lab showed the statue being removed from the Campidoglio in '81. The one closest to Mariella was of Marcus being lifted in a harness from the back of the horse.

The official project to restore the statue had begun just this spring, and Mariella was a part of the team. She still could not believe her luck.

Tools in hand, Mariella climbed onto the platform that ran parallel to the horse's flank. The team's main focus at the moment was on cleaning the statue. Through a series of tests, they had determined many of the elements that had corroded the bronze and were now experimenting with different cleaning solutions.

Mariella reached her designated place at the horse's side and sat back on her heels. The bit of bronze she was to work with extended only a few centimeters in either direction, and she focused in on it as she picked up her flask of demineralized water. They had decided to begin with this solution since it was a safe choice and wouldn't damage the bronze, and their work was already yielding results. Details in the metal were becoming clearer, more defined. Given more time they hoped to reveal where others had attempted restorations in the past.

She dipped her small brush in the water and applied the solution to the statue before her. While she was working, she was able to tune out almost everything around her. It was only when she felt sharp pangs in her stomach about an hour later that she realized how hungry she was, having left the house before she could eat. Her mind flashed to the little bar just down the street that had the best pastries; she and her coworkers went there frequently. It would be so good right now.

No, she told herself, disgusted that she was thinking about her stomach when she had been late this morning. Who cared if she was hungry? She probably deserved to be hungry.

She could almost taste the buttery dough flaking in her mouth.

The battle in her mind raged on, and after a few minutes she had to put down her brush, not wanting to risk messing up the statue in her distraction. Would anyone mind if she just slipped out for a few minutes? After all, she rationalized, she was human. She needed to eat just as much as anyone else did. In a supreme effort not to over-think things, she stood up on sore legs and returned her tools to her station. Nobody paid her any attention as she left the lab. Maybe it looked like she just had to use the toilet.

Grabbing her wallet and ditching her white coat in her locker, Mariella waited until she got outside before breaking into a jog. She was at the bar in less than a minute.

"Mariella!" the man behind the counter exclaimed when he saw her. He was a jovial man, short and balding. Mariella and her coworkers had had many conversations with him and his wife.

"Ciao, Antonello."

“You’re usually here later in the day.”

“My timing is all messed up today. Can I get one of these?” she said, pointing to something in the case.

“Certo signorina.” Mariella fumbled for coins as he brought her the pastry. “Non ti preoccupare, Mariella. I’ll take care of it.” She started to protest, but he waved her aside and handed her the bag.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully, flashing him a smile before leaving the bar.

Mariella practically inhaled the pastry as she walked quickly back to the Istituto. It was gone before she could properly savor it, but all she could think about was that if she got fired for a piece of sugary bread she would never forgive herself. How do you explain that at an interview?

Besides, she thought as she reached her locker and donned her lab coat once more. She loved working on the equestrian statue. It was an enormous honor. The thought of losing this opportunity hurt more than the thought of having to look for work somewhere else.

Only a couple of people glanced her way as she walked into the lab and back to her station. The stress of this day was just too much, she thought, shaking her head. Tonight she would make sure to set her morning alarm for earlier than usual.

After a few minutes, Alessandra walked around the room to check up on the students’ progress, offering a compliment or critique here and there. She lingered for a while at Marisa’s station, examining the girl’s work on the horse’s flank. Mariella’s heart raced.

“Very good work, Mariella,” said Alessandra. “You have wonderful attention to detail.”

The girl suppressed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Alessandra.” She began to relax as her boss started to walk away.

“Mariella?” said Alessandra.

“Yes?”

“You have a bit of sugar, just there.”

Alessandra walked away, chuckling. Mariella felt like she would die.

Eighteen

Rome, 1990

21 April

“This is unbelievable,” said Antonio, watching the crowds continue to pour into the courtyard.

The guard smiled. “A good day for the museum.”

“That’s an understatement.” The space in front of the glass-encased statue of Marcus Aurelius and his horse had been packed all day, flooded with people come to see the bronze figures.

“Well, it’s a great work of art, and today is a great day for the city,” the guard remarked.

Antonio pulled out his notepad. “Mind if I quote you on that?”

The guard shrugged. “If you want.” The reporter scribbled on his paper. “Know what you’re going to call the article?”

“Not yet.” Antonio’s assignment had been to cover the celebrations taking place for Rome’s birthday, and he thought he had found an interesting angle to take it from. Ten days ago, the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius had been returned to the Campidoglio for the first time in nine years, after having undergone cleaning and restoration work. Now it sat behind glass in a courtyard of the Musei Capitolini, and the crowds had not stopped coming. There had to be a story here.

The reporter had been standing on the outskirts of the courtyard for about an hour now, observing all the attention the statue was getting. It was remarkable to him that one statue could cause such a stir. He was as appreciative of the city’s history as any other Roman, but the fact that so many thousands had made a point of stopping here amongst all of today’s festivities? The statue’s meaning for these people clearly went beyond its physical form. “I’m going to try to grab some folks, I think.”

“Good luck,” said the guard.

Antonio left his post by the wall and made his way into the crowd. Finding people willing to talk to him could be difficult, especially crammed together as they were. He decided to start safe. After a couple minutes of searching and navigating the throng, he spotted what he wanted: a couple looking to be in their twenties, young enough that they might be excited to be interviewed and bolder in each other’s company. He waited until they started to leave the courtyard before approaching them.

“Good morning,” he said in a friendly tone. “My name is Antonio, I work for *La Repubblica*. Any chance I could ask you a few questions about your visit to the Musei today?”

The young woman looked pleased. “Sure.”

“Go ahead,” said the... Antonio looked at their hands. No rings. Boyfriend.

“Are you two from Rome?”

“I am,” said the woman. “Lived here all my life. My boyfriend is from America.”

“Really?” said Antonio, turning to the boyfriend. He didn’t look American at all; Antonio wouldn’t have guessed he wasn’t from here. “That’s quite the move.”

“I have family here, and I suppose I wanted a change.” The young man spoke in perfect Italian.

“So tell me,” said Antonio, looking between the two of them. “How do you feel about the equestrian statue not being returned to its spot in the center of the piazza outside?”

“I mean, it makes sense,” the man replied. “The pollution in the air would be toxic for it.”

“It makes sense,” his girlfriend repeated. “Though it still feels weird. I grew up with the statue outside, and I know it had been that way for hundreds of years. It’s just... sad, I guess. It needs to be inside, but it also belongs out there, you know?”

Antonio nodded, jotting some things down. “Yeah. I grew up here too, so I understand having memories of it outside. I guess we’ll all have to adjust.”

“Well, it seems people are adjusting pretty well,” the boyfriend observed, stepping to avoid the people moving past. “The place is packed.”

Antonio nodded and smiled. “True. Well, thank you both for your time. Can I get your names?” After recording them in his notepad, he left the couple to find someone else. There was an angry-looking man sulking in the corner. He decided to try him; he looked like he had some things to say.

“Excuse me, sir?” the reporter began when he reached the man. “My name is Antonio, I work for *La Repubblica* —”

“No,” said the man, slashing the air with a stiff hand.

“I just wanted to ask you some questions —”

“No questions.”

“About the statue,” he finished.

“I’m not talking to any reporters. Go away,” the man spat, raising his voice.

A few people nearby looked over, and Antonio backed away, cursing under his breath. That probably ruined his chances of talking to anyone who might have heard. He would have to wait for new people to cycle through. Resigned, he lost himself in the crowd and waited a few minutes before trying again. This time he tried a middle-aged man with a young daughter on his shoulders.

“Excuse me, sir? My name is Antonio, I work for *La Repubblica*. Any chance I could ask you a few questions about your visit to the Musei today?” He decided not to mention interviewing his daughter. The man might get protective and close up.

“All right,” he said, a bit apprehensively.

“Is this your first time seeing the equestrian statue?” Antonio gestured to the bronze.

“My first time seeing it somewhere other than Michelangelo’s piazza,” the man replied.

Antonio could tell from the way the man specified the architect that he wasn’t going to be pleased with the statue’s relocation.

“So you’re familiar with the statue’s history on the Campidoglio, then?” he baited.

“Of course. The piazza is a masterpiece, and now it’s been robbed.”

“You’re not happy that the statue wasn’t returned there.”

“Are you serious? It’s been outside for nearly two thousand years, and now they want to put it behind glass?” The little girl on his shoulder clapped her hands, obviously oblivious to their conversation. “Listen, I’m not an idiot. I know what they’re saying about the potential for damage if the statue were to remain outside. But isn’t that the case with everything out there? You can’t just move it all because you’re afraid. These things have stood outside since their creation, and that’s where they belong. You take it away, you rob the place of its history and the monument of its birthright.”

Antonio was writing like mad in his notepad, trying to hide the glee he felt. This was perfect stuff. “I see your point,” he said diplomatically as he finished up. “It changes the city.”

The man nodded, and the little girl patted his head.

“Is this your daughter?” Antonio asked.

“Yes. Alessia here won’t experience the statue like she ought to.”

“Who knows, maybe they’ll find a way to protect it outside.”

The man snorted. “Yeah, maybe.”

Okay, this guy was clearly very bitter. Antonio took his name and thanked him for his time before walking away.

The reporter spent the next half hour finding various others to interview. A lot of them agreed with the first couple he had met: it made sense to put the statue in a climate-controlled area, where it could be protected. Still, most felt that it *belonged* outside, even if it needed to be in the museum for now. A few people were angry it was inside at all.

When he thought he’d gotten enough quotes, Antonio returned to his post at the wall. The same guard as before was there and chuckled.

“I saw you got some people,” said the guard.

Antonio leaned with his back against the wall. “Yeah, it went pretty well.”

“Cool.”

“Has it been like this since the statue got here?”

The guard shrugged. “It hasn’t been quite this packed, but there have been a lot of people in the last few days.”

“Were you there for the procession?” Antonio asked, thinking of the hundreds of people that had accompanied the statue on its journey home.

“No, I had to work.” He paused. “But I heard it was really something.”

“Oh yeah.” There had been two trucks, one carrying the emperor, and the other his horse. Both bronzes had been wrapped up extensively and carefully secured in the vehicles and then driven from the Instituto Centrale del Restauro to top of the Capitoline Hill. Hundreds of people had followed on foot, filling in the roads after the trucks had passed. The streets had been cleared for the event, and though the journey was slow, spirits were high. Romans loved that statue, and it had been away from its home on the Capitoline for too long. Antonio had been part of the crowd and had written an article about it. Now he was hoping to continue that story.

The museum guard was staring at Antonio. “Sorry, what was that?” asked the reporter.

“I said my shift is up.”

“Oh. Well thank you for talking to me. What’s your name, for the quote?”

“Benedetto Lupo.”

“Thank you, Signor Lupo. Two more questions, quick I promise. Are you originally from Rome?”

“Born in Trastevere.”

“And how long have you been working at the Musei Capitolini?”

“Twenty one years.”

“Wow. Have you ever wanted to work somewhere else? Seems like it could get pretty boring after a while.”

“I can’t imagine working anywhere else. I love the art and watching people’s reactions to it.”

Antonio nodded, touched. This was why he loved his job, meeting people like this. “I’m glad to hear it. Thank you again for your time.”

The guard smiled. “I hope your article comes out well. I’ll look for it.”

“I think it will,” said Antonio. “I have a lot to work with.”

Nineteen

Rome, 2000

"Take your brother with you!" the girl's mother called after her.

The dreaded words.

Alessia skidded to a halt and turned in time to see her ten-year-old brother Daniele nearly crash into her. Though he was four years younger, he already almost matched her in height. On top of that, they looked enough alike that every once in a while someone would ask if they were twins. It annoyed her to no end.

"Why'd you stop?" asked Daniele, hands on his hips. Alessia glared at him.

"Did you ask Mamma if you could come?"

"No!" he exclaimed, looking indignant.

She considered him for a few moments, resigning herself to the fact that she wouldn't be able to ditch him. "Don't be a dork," she commanded. "And *don't* embarrass me."

Before her brother could reply, Alessia spun around and headed up the hill. Daniele kept pace as they crested the top and walked straight for the center of the piazza. Three teenagers sat chatting at the base of the equestrian statue, the designated meeting spot. They sprang up when they saw her approaching.

"Finally!" said Luca, a short, skinny boy with a tangled mess of hair. "We were beginning to feel as ancient as this statue." The two girls with him rolled their eyes.

"That statue's a replica, stupid," Alessia retorted. "It's like three years old."

"Whatever."

"Although it *should* be the real one."

Her friends groaned. "Don't start that again, Lessi," said Viola.

Alessia shrugged. She had heard so many of her father's rants about the mistreatment of ancient art that she had begun to rant some herself.

"Hey Daniele," said Eliana, changing the subject. The question was implied.

"I had to bring him," Alessia explained. Her brother just said hi back and grinned from ear to ear. Nothing ever seemed to embarrass him.

"It's cool," said Luca, giving Daniele a slap on the back.

"So are we going inside or what?" asked Viola.

"Yeah, let's go."

"Okay but I have to be out in a couple of hours," Alessia warned. Tonight was the Mass of the Lord's Supper, and Alessia's family was attending service in the Lateran. Celebrations for the Jubilee never seemed to stop.

The five of them made their way to the ticket line for the museums. Renovations for the buildings had just been completed, and the kids were excited to see the results. The wait to get in was long, and all except Daniele became a little irritable, but peace was restored once they finally got inside the museum.

After a brief debate on where to go first, the group decided simply to wander. The halls were crowded, but the kids were small enough that they could weave their way through the masses fairly easily. They moved rather quickly through the rooms, though they did linger for a while in one filled with busts of Roman emperors. There they had a good laugh arguing over which emperor was the best looking (a tie between Augustus and Elagabalus) before being shooed away by a older-looking guard.

“Hey look, it’s Alessia’s favorite statue,” Luca observed dryly when they came across the equestrian statue that the replica in the middle of the piazza outside was based on.

“It’s not my favorite,” said Alessia. “It’s just a shame its inside, that’s all.”

“It has to be inside,” Viola reported, scanning the sign posted beside the bronze. “There’s pollution and things.”

“I know.”

“His hair looks like Luca’s,” Daniele said, giggling.

“Luca’s isn’t that neat,” Viola countered.

“Let’s keep going,” Luca said, growing bored.

“In a minute.”

Luca walked away, followed closely by Daniele. Viola trailed after them a minute later. As soon as they were out of earshot, Alessia rounded on Eliana.

“What’s wrong?”

Eliana looked briefly alarmed at the question, then shrugged. “Nothing. What do you mean?”

“You’ve barely said a word all day.”

“I guess I’m just tired.”

Alessia hesitated. “Are they arguing again?” Eliana took a sudden interest in the bronze horse’s hoofs. “Eliana.”

Her friend just shrugged again. “It’s no big deal.”

“It bothers you.”

“It doesn’t concern me.”

“Is that what they told you?”

Eliana glared at her. “Don’t act like you know everything.”

“I’m not!” Alessia protested.

“Because you don’t.”

"I know." She waited until her friend looked calmer before speaking again. "I'm just concerned."

Eliana sighed. "Don't be. Seriously."

They were both silent as they stared up at the bronze emperor. "He does kind of look like Luca, actually," Alessia remarked. A peace offering.

Eliana laughed a little. "Yeah, kind of."

The two went to find the rest of their group.



"Come on, Daniele, we're going to be late!" Alessia was trying to get the two of them home, but it was taking a while. Daniele kept stopping to stare at something new. "Honestly," she huffed, grabbing his hand and pulling him forward. They used to have fun together. Why did he have to be so annoying now?

"Hey!" he cried when she yanked too hard.

"Well if you didn't walk so slowly, I wouldn't have to tug you along."

Alessia kept up a merciless pace until they reached the bus stop. As soon as she released Daniele's hand, he wiped it on his pants and bunched up his face, looking angry. "Sorry," she grumbled, deciding she didn't want him complaining to their parents. Her brother said nothing, just stood there making a point of looking everywhere except at her. She checked her watch.

"Is something wrong with Eliana?" Daniele asked after a minute.

Alessia was taken off-guard. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. She looked sad."

"She's fine."

"Okay."

Alessia studied her brother a moment longer, but he seemed to have lost interest. The bus was taking a while to come, and she started to feel a little bad for dragging him around.

"Hey," she said. "Let's play a game."

Daniele grinned. "What kind of game?"

"I don't know. A word game."

When the bus finally arrived, they stepped onto it in high spirits. The ride home seemed to take less time than usual, and before they knew it they were bounding towards their flat. Their mother met them at the door. "Cutting it a little close," she said. "Have a good time?" They both nodded. "Good. Now go change while I finish getting dinner on the table."

The kids did as they were told. When Alessia finished getting ready, she met her father in the living room. He asked what she and her brother had seen in the museum, so she listed off the things she remembered. When she got to the Marcus Aurelius statue, she became irritated.

“They made fun of me for caring where it goes,” she complained.

Her father smiled. “Did you tell them it belongs outside?”

“Obviously. Michelangelo’s piazza.”

“Actually,” he said conspiratorially, “did you know it originally stood outside the Lateran?”

“Like where we’re going tonight?”

“Well yes, what other Lateran is there?”

Cool. Another fact to add to her rants.

Twenty

Rome, 2012

Wendy couldn't believe what she was seeing. There behind a sheet of glass was the Edict of Worms, the actual Edict of Worms in which the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V exiled Martin Luther and ordered his works destroyed. She checked the date: May 8, 1521. May 8, one of her friends was born on May 8. She had always thought it was a prettier date than her own birthday. And look what had happened on it, nearly five hundred years ago. All around her were documents written by and about people she had studied in history classes. Now, instead of a face to attach to the names, she had their handwriting. Studying the page in front of her for a few moments more, Wendy pulled out a small notepad and jotted down what she was seeing so that she would be able to remember it later.

It was crazy to think that she was in Rome right now. Rome, a place she'd visited before only in pictures, books, and countless reruns of *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*. Wendy had dreamed of studying in Italy for years. Now here she was, spending half of her junior year of college in a Classics program with a few dozen other American students. Sometimes it still didn't feel real.

Wendy progressed slowly through the exhibit, examining as many of the documents as she could without falling too far behind the group she had come with. The Capitoline Museum was having a special exhibit showcasing items from the Vatican Secret Archives. The collection was enormous and included some incredible things. Here was a book on the lives of the popes written by Sixtus IV's librarian, a note written by Marie Antoinette to her brother-in-law, a letter Michelangelo wrote to a bishop in 1550, trying to arrange for his workmen to be paid.

"You're still in this room?" Wendy's friend Annie reappeared at her side. She was someone Wendy probably wouldn't have been friends with had they met back home, but here, in such a small program, they had become fairly close.

"Hey, Patrick is too," Wendy pointed out defensively.

"You're both so slow."

"What? I want to see everything."

"Whatever. Did you see the huge book a few cases back? It's like thousands of pages long."

"Yeah that was awesome."

"I know."

A couple was hovering nearby, waiting to see what was in the case that the two girls now blocked. Wendy followed her friend into the next room, where they ran into Hannah trying to sneak a photo of something. Without being asked Wendy moved to cover her side so she could get the picture.

Hannah smiled and flicked back her bright orange hair, her mission successful. "Thanks."

“Where are Ben and Mark?” asked Annie. She didn’t love Hannah.

“I don’t know, somewhere up ahead.”

“Cool.” She left to go look for them.

“How much longer are you thinking of staying?” said Hannah.

Wendy rubbed the back of her neck. “I don’t know. I mean, I want to finish the exhibit.”

Hannah nodded. “Okay. I guess we’ll meet at the end.”

“Yep. See ya.”

Wendy backtracked to the things she had missed. Normally she grew tired of museums after a while, but not today. She walked over to a case and saw a letter Abraham Lincoln had written to the Pope in 1863, addressing him as “Great and good friend.” The president had written to the Pope? Who knew. Next she came across a document with Napoleon’s signature. Great. Now she had *Les Miserables* songs stuck in her head. *Do you hear the people sing, singing the song of angry —*

“Fancy seeing you here.”

That voice was unexpected. Wendy’s stomach did a little flip. “Hey,” she said, turning to face him. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Some of us caught a later bus.”

“Ah.”

“This exhibit is pretty awesome.”

“Yeah.” She just stood there nodding, unable to think of anything else to say. God she was an idiot.

He glanced behind him. “Well, I’m gonna go look around. See you later I’m sure.”

“Yep. Enjoy.”

Wendy forced herself to wait a full minute before leaving the room.

She spent the next hour finishing the exhibit. It was impossible to remember everything she had seen, so she was glad she had written a few of them down. There weren’t any kids from her program at the exhibit exit, so she walked a little further down the hall. Marble statues stood against the wall, spaced a few feet apart. Wendy smiled and stopped when she spotted one of Commodus dressed as Hercules. She remembered seeing a picture of this in art history once. Noting that pictures were once again permitted, she pulled out her camera and snapped a shot. Maybe it would go in her next blog post. Speaking of which, that was due for an update. She made a mental note to work on that later, knowing she would forget it in about five minutes.

Further down, the hall opened up into a wide room brilliantly lit by the sunlight streaming in through large windows. Her gaze was drawn instantly to the giant horse in the corner. As

someone who had spent her life riding, Wendy loved anything to do with horses. She was like a five year old when it came to them.

She laughed in amazement when she realized she had seen this too in her high school art history class. The bronze statue towered above her. The rider was an emperor, right? She checked the panel. Yes, Marcus Aurelius. Some of the points made in class came back to her: the emperor rode without stirrups, his raised arm conveyed power and maybe benevolence too, and... wasn't there something about the horse's leg being raised? Like a raised leg meant that someone had died or something. Maybe she was making that up.

But she loved this statue. After a few minutes of staring, she raised her camera to try to get some artsy shots. She had to back up quite a bit in order to fit the whole statue in the frame. There, don't center it — put the bronze on the side of the photo. Pictures look better in thirds.

Once she was satisfied with her work, she walked around the rest of the room. The famous statue of the wolf suckling Romulus and Remus was there, too. Apparently she had hit the jackpot here.

Wendy heard her name and turned to see some more people from her group walk in. Annie joined her by the wolf.

"So cool," said Annie.

"I know. I love the equestrian statue over there, too."

"Okay, that's huge. Hey, will you take a picture of me?"

She snapped a photo of Annie in front of the wolf and finished walking the room with her. It was a good twenty minutes or so before the rest of their people arrived. When they were all assembled, they decided some food was in order. It was time to leave the museum.

"Everyone good?" asked Mark. When no one objected, they filed toward the hall that would take them to an exit.

After a few steps, Wendy turned around to look at the Marcus Aurelius statue one last time. It had already disappeared from view. She felt a slight pang of disappointment.

"Next time," she thought, and followed her friends out.

Overview of My Creative Process and What I Learned

From the beginning, the aim of my senior thesis was to write a Greek and Roman Studies thesis that would allow me to incorporate my History correlate. I did this by taking an object from antiquity and tracing it throughout time from its creation to today. Such a project allowed me to study the different meanings an object takes on when encountered by a variety of people, cultures, technologies, and ideologies. It also allowed me to examine the changes in these people, cultures, technologies, and ideologies themselves.

I chose as my object the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius. The fact that it survives today is remarkable, because most ancient bronzes were melted down so that the metal could be reused. Already a question arises: what made this statue special enough to have eluded such destruction? Did it survive due to the impact it had on the people who encountered it, the difficulty of moving something so big, or perhaps something as simple as luck? In writing a work of historical fiction, I was able to explore the possibilities. Throughout the novella, the statue's significance for the people around it is explored.

Tracing the statue from its construction circa 180CE up until 2012 required the use of an immense variety of sources. This variety was not necessarily due to the amount I needed to learn about each historical period, for I did not always have to go very in depth within a period, but rather to the sheer number of periods I had to write about. Each one was a world in itself. What did Rome look like in that time, and what was happening there at the point when we enter the story? Who was in the city, and what is history for those people? I tried to base my work primarily in books, though internet resources such as *Britannica Online* were very useful for quick fact checking. Many of my sources were secondary sources.

Tracing the statue through so many historical periods meant that all of the characters in the novella would come with their own knowledge of past and current events, as well as unique perspectives on the statue or the city. Their thoughts and actions had to be appropriate for the time period, which means that they needed to reflect the limitations in knowledge a person living at that time would have possessed and the ways in which a person living at that time might have felt. For example, Chapters 8 and 9 take place in the first half of the fourteenth century, which was a time of decline for Rome. The Pope's absence left a power gap that was filled with warring barons. The city was stricken with famine, plague, fires, and poverty. I had to create protagonists for these two chapters in a way that was specific to these conditions. The characters had to feel the effects of the city's deterioration and be products of the environment in which they lived. Paolino da Venezia, the mapmaker in Chapter 8, is dirty, jaded, and a drunk. I created him thus in the hope that it would reflect the poor state of his city. Lisabetta, the protagonist in Chapter 9, cannot remember the last time she laughed. Her husband is dead, the people are hungry, and competing aristocrats are destroying Rome. "Her city was not a happy one," the narration reads.

At every stage in the process, I had to make decisions regarding dozens of questions that arose. They could relate to a major historical event or the tiniest detail. To get an idea of the difficulties this often presented, consider my very first questions about the equestrian statue: when was it built, why was it built, and where was it placed? These questions are basic, not to mention essential for my project, but none of their answers are unanimously agreed upon by scholars today. Some argue that the statue was built before Marcus's death, while others say shortly after. Many say it was placed in front of what is today the Lateran Basilica, in Marcus's time a military barracks for the emperor's equestrian guard, while some argue that it was placed

in the Forum Romanum. As for the reason the statue was built, scholars can reasonably conclude that it was an honorific statue, but the exact event, if any, that it was honoring is unknown. The horse's Sarmatian saddle cloth leads many to believe that it was made to commemorate Marcus's heavy involvement in the Germanic wars that consumed most of his reign. In the end, I decided to place it at the Lateran, to have it built very soon after Marcus's death, and to have it commemorate his military triumphs.

Questions like these arose in every chapter of the work. Some more examples are as follows: where did the pope live before the Vatican, and when did the move to the Vatican take place? How would a military commander have addressed a Roman emperor? How does the indirect lost wax technique for casting bronze work? When was the Hagia Sophia built, and was it early enough for Charlemagne to be able to compare Sant'Apollinare with it in one line of the text? Who was traveling to Rome in the eighteenth century and why? If I could not find definitive answers, I made decisions based on what seemed to me to be most logical given the available information, as well as what seemed best for storytelling purposes.

Answering these questions as best as I could was very important to me, because I wanted to make this novella as historically accurate as possible. It goes without saying that I had to make many things up. Many of the characters are not real people. They did not exist. Even for the characters who are people that actually existed, like Michelangelo from Chapter 14 or Petro from Chapter 6, I do not know what conversations they had, what they were thinking of during the events I wrote about, and so forth. My goal, however, was to make it so that all of these people *could* have existed. I wanted it to make sense for them to think and act as I have them do. As previously discussed, part of this meant understanding and building their worlds as accurately as

possible. (After this completing this project, I can safely say that I now have a firmer grasp of the general history of Rome throughout the centuries.) Even when some of the things I knew about those worlds did not always make it directly into the piece, they influenced the way I created and wrote about the factors that *were* present in the text.

The coexistence of real and imagined people illustrates how in this novella, fiction and nonfiction come together to create a work in which, I hope, the fiction is for the most part plausible enough that it cannot be distinguished from the nonfiction when reading. In Chapter 2, I say that the Roman Senate did not want to put the statue in the Forum Romanum because they wanted to avoid associating the Aurelius statue with the equestrian statue of Domitian that was there previously. I made that up. (Though I suppose it could have been true and we just do not know it.) But it seemed logical to me after reading that Domitian was despised and his equestrian statue torn down. As another example, the four members of the Algardi family in Chapter 16 were not real people. But their street, the Via della Reginella, was a real street in the Jewish Ghetto that people were taken from, and the events that the family experiences are taken from the account of a woman named Settimia Spizzichino, the sole survival of this deportation of one thousand and twenty-three Jews on October 16, 1943. I know that October 16 was a Saturday. I know that it was raining. I know approximately what time in the day the Jews were rounded up and where they were taken to. After learning these things, all I had to do was create a family and placed them in this setting.

Being so preoccupied with historical accuracy in a creative work was not a burden. Rather, it was a joy to be able to imagine and create something that felt real. I chose to write historical fiction for my thesis because it allowed me to be creative and use imagination in an

academic exercise. Indeed, the combination of fact and imagination that is central to this project is, I think, a large part of the study of history itself. We learn about the development of geographical areas over time, the occurrence of events, and the lives of various people, but we can only imagine what it was actually like. This is one of the main reasons why I am so drawn to the study of history, both ancient and early modern. I love knowing about certain things that happened in the past and trying to imagine what it was like for the people living in that moment. To look at a monument, an old building, or a piece of pottery and know that hundreds or thousands of years ago, someone was looking at it too. Someone *created* that. In a way, then, I suppose my thesis is sort of a reflection of the study of history itself. In studying and teaching history, we are all storytellers in a way.